

**Imaginative
Tales**

ACTION-PACKED SCIENCE FICTION

35¢

ANC

THE COSMIC BUNGLERS

by Geoff St. Reynard

JANUARY, 1956



Introducing the

AUTHOR



Richard O. Lewis



AT the present writing, I am sitting in my upstairs living room beside a window which opens out above my back yard. There in the back yard—waiting—is my canoe. A scant fifty paces beyond the canoe—waiting—is the Mississippi river. A scant 120 miles beyond the river—waiting for this—is Bill Hamling.

Well, duty first . . .

I came to this town (Sabula, Iowa) four summers ago to go fishing. The town, four blocks wide by 10 long, is bounded on three sides by the Mississippi and on the fourth by a chain of four lakes. North and south lie thousands of acres of lakes, islands, waterways, and swamps. Having a love for such things, I stayed.

I direct the high school band

here, my wife teaches kindergarten, and together we manage the local telephone exchange. Besides this and writing, I present "shows" of hypnotism and crystal-ball gazing, enjoy fishing and exploring the swamps, and dream of the future.

The "future" will begin not later than two summers from now. At that time, my wife and I hope to sell, burn, lose, or give away all material possessions except for those which can be packed into the canoe and used on an extended voyage. We'll head southward with no geographical goal in mind, no hurry, and no time limit. We enjoy the sun, the water, the ever-changing scenery, and the complete freedom of it all.

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JANUARY 1956

Imaginative Tales

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NEW AND
COMPLETE

William L. Hamling
Editor

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The Editorial.....

EVERY year science fiction fans gather from all over the country at a specified city for the annual World Science Fiction Convention. Over the past Labor Day weekend the 1955 convention was held at Cleveland, Ohio. It was a lot of fun—and you should have been there to enjoy it!

SCIENCE fiction conventions are rather unique. Actually, readers of science fiction are in a distinct minority compared to western and detective story enthusiasts. The distinction, we think, lies in the fact that readers of science fiction not only get a kick out of their favorite type of reading enjoyment, but take their subject seriously.

AND why not? Science fiction *looks ahead* to tomorrow—next year—and the centuries beyond. Behind all the action and suspense which go into making any story worthwhile reading, a science fiction story, in addition, predicts future life in relation to ideas of a scientific nature, and extrapolates on already existing technology. We get, in other words, a lot of meat with our potatoes.

THE dessert comes each year when readers, writers, editors, artists, and publishers get together for a weekend of getting to know each other personally—or renewing

old friendships. Like any convention, of course, there's a serious side which perhaps transcends the fun of the moment. In science fiction this year there was definitely a serious side which received quite a bit of off-the-cuff discussion.

THE whole thing boiled down to the question: where is science fiction going? There was a good reason for this question popping up. The field, contrary to popular belief, has not expanded its readership at a time when the world is definitely science conscious. Atomic power, television, radar, rockets, etc., used to be the standbys of science fiction, but now they are a part of our way of life—for the betterment of it, we trust. At any rate, technological advancement, which forms the nucleus of science fiction, has not broadened the readership horizon. Why? We have the feeling that perhaps science fiction magazines have been making it too difficult for the newcomer—in other words the stories are a bit over the heads of new readers. Or perhaps, in some cases, too much emphasis is placed on literary merit of one type or another.

WE remember — with great fondness—the novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs, which by some modern critical standards are considered “old hat” and yet we still get a kick out of the swash-buckling adventures of the “John

Carter" series, among others. We have a strong hunch that times haven't changed any—or that much—since the days we cut our science fiction teeth on writers like Burroughs. True, Burroughs is gone, and perhaps there won't be another like him. But he left a blueprint for writing and reading enjoyment that editors and writers might well follow. Certainly readers won't be inclined to object—will you?

ALL this boils down to that question at the convention: where is science fiction going? We think it's going on a grand adventure—if we provide enough adventure! It certainly shouldn't be hard to do. We've got the universe as our

stage with an infinity of worlds and life-forms to write about. And this doesn't even begin to tap the Time stories and doorways to other dimensions! Mix in the hero, heroine, villain, and plenty of action-suspense, and you've got what should be a gripping yarn. Space Opera? Call it what you will—but you'll enjoy it, and so will the new reader who doesn't have your background in the field.

WE left Cleveland and the convention with this thought prominent in our mind. Let's not take ourselves *too* seriously! Let's sit back and enjoy science fiction *adventures*—and look forward to seeing thousands attend future conventions wh



"Oops! Wrong button!"

The Cosmic Bunglers

by

Geoff St. Reynard

Government scientists had accomplished the impossible—crashing the speed of light. However, they soon learned the impossible was yet to come!

THE day we broke the light barrier was the day the highwaymen came back. The juxtaposition of Project Pow's successful inauguration with Galloping Jonas's holdup of the trans-





continental bus was so perfect that we all drew the wrong conclusions . . . Let me tell it from the start.

Out on the Nevada desert there was a testing ground that was twenty miles long and as flat as an ivory chess board. Flatter. It was sixty yards broad and at the center, ten full miles from either end, it was troughed pretty deeply, to compensate for the earth's curvature. Here is how totally *flat* it was; if you'd fired a bullet straight along its course at a height of half an inch from the concreted flooring, supposing that slug didn't waver, it would have ended half an inch above the floor twenty miles off. There'd never been anything in this world so flat and long before. I know. I helped to dig that fabulous trench.

I'd jockeyed a bulldozer three summers before going to the university. When I'd added an M. Sc. to my name—Sam Black, M. Sc., and not Samuel, dammit, I was christened Sam — I threw a nervous breakdown; too many books, too little play. The medics told me to do some labor with my big skinny hands, to forget fuels and ignore space stations. So instead of engineering the big ditch, I 'dozed part of it. Sweated and drank beer and listened to jazz, gradually knitting up the raveled nerve ends.

We finished the superflat furrow

and by then I'd toughened up and eased down to normal; which is why I'm alive, I suppose. One ounce less muscle on my six-three, 200-pound carcass, and I'd be lying in the weeds with Gothic Beall's dirk in my guts. I'll get to that. I'm skipping around. Never wrote much except formulae and post cards before. Bear with me.

Then I went to my proper work, which was concerned with the incredible fuel we were utilizing on Project Pow. *Pow*—that was collegiate-style humor, that name, whistling in a dark that was full of impossible certainties and liable to explode all over us and end everything in a shower of sundered atoms. Project Pow was something we hadn't expected to accomplish for at least four hundred years. Not even a landing on the moon yet, and here we were with two freak discoveries that would enable us to surpass the speed of light.

The fuel was first; basic principle discovered in Oakland, California, last August. On its heels, in October, the invention of the new alloy sclerium: in a tiny laboratory in Quebec. We put the two together and got a missile that no speed could damage, powered with a fuel so powerful the mind boggled at its terrifying potential. So we'd built our flatland in the desert, and

were ready to try it out.

Light travels, speaking in round figures, at a speed of 186,273 miles per second in air, and 186,320 in a vacuum. Our 20-mile trench was equipped with instruments which would give us the speed of an object in millionths of a second. We constructed a minuscule spaceship, and into its bowels we lowered an amount of calefite — the new fuel — that you could have mislaid on the point of a needle. At the north end of the ditch we erected our launching platform, spending eighteen days in the sighting of it. Down at the south end was a cradle contraption, which would snatch the preposterous toy out of the air at the end of its flight. Then we were ready to test.

For longer than I like to admit — our fearful procrastination seems cowardly now, in hind-sight — we hemmed and hawed, rechecking figures, calculating anew . . . Well, I remember when I was in grammar school and they were just about to break through the sound barrier, and a lot of intelligent men were scared stiff for fear the whole fabric of our planet would tear asunder. How infinitely vaster were the horrors of ignorant man, about to surpass the greatest velocity known; that of light itself! No one could predict what in hell would happen.

IF we'd speculated for a decade we could never have predicted Galloping Jonas. A nova, sure. A system-wide cataclysm. Even, if we'd thought of Time as a dimension, a dinosaur or a man from the twenty-ninth century. But not, heaven help us, Galloping Jonas and his good nag Tess!

Finally we brought ourselves to the point of desperation, of *having* to find out, and against the screeches of calamity-howlers all over the globe, we gathered one morning at the ditch and sent off our miniature ship.

The instruments measured its time of flight at just under a hundred and five millionths of a second, or somewhere in the neighborhood of 190,000 miles per second. Considerably brisker than light had that little scrap of sclerium flown, and the world, so far as we could tell, was still in little danger of exploding. There had been noise, certainly — a crash that brought echoes like machine-gun fire reverberating from the flat — but beyond a few windows shattered there was no damage.

The ship was examined, after it had cooled, and our belief in its indestructibility was confirmed. Then, as the awestruck congratulations were being passed around, someone, I forget who, suggested that maybe we didn't have a faster-

than-light deal at all. The properties of calefite were only dimly understood. Mightn't it be that we had a medium of near-instantaneous teleportation here, instead of a super-fuel?

It shows how taut and distracted we were, that we believed this might be true. Nobody asked why the ship would have been teleported right down to the cradle rather than to Australia or Mars; we set up the experiment again and this time erected an enormous sheet of oiled paper at the trench's midpoint. Then we gave our toy its second flight. The heavy paper we picked up in shreds and patches all over the surrounding acre. The ship rested in the cradle, having once more exceeded light's speed limit, this time at roughly 189,240 m. p. s. Teleportation was out.

So twice in a single day, once at 9:46 a. m. and again at 3:16 p. m., we had broken the light barrier.

I think the newspaper report of the next incident tells it better than I could . . .

"June 3: At a point in the Mormon Range between Caliente and Mesquite, Nevada, at about ten o'clock tonight, a transcontinental bus of the Blackbird Lines was ambushed and robbed by a man who is being spoken of as a lunatic, a phantom, or a fantastically elaborate practical joker. Any of these

guesses seems as good as the others.

"The driver, Bernard John, 28, told this reporter: 'I was rounding this bend and all of a sudden there was this big mess of brush and logs in the road and I had to stop the crate quick. Just as I opened the door there was a crash and down off the hill came this big black horse with the crackpot on top. He leaned in and shoved a couple of cannons into my face. They must have had three-inch bores in them. He was dressed like nothing you ever saw and I didn't understand one word in six he yelled at me, but I took it he was sticking up the bus and I didn't argue. Maybe I should have hit him with a spanner? I'm paid to be a hero?'

"The horseman dismounted and walked through the bus, collecting jewelry and money. No one made any move to attack him. He peered closely at the money, seeming astonished at it, though no one could tell why. He then returned to his horse, and after a long gaze at the front of the bus, he scratched his head, said 'Where did the nags go?' quite audibly, and galloped off down the highway.

"The following statement was taken by this reporter from Dr. H. Lloyd Rawlins, well-known historian, a passenger on the bus:

'My period is the early 18th Century. Save that the man's weapons and clothing were nearly new, he might have stepped directly out of Walpole's England. He was fair and well-built, six feet one or two, and spoke with a Norfolk accent in the idiom of 1725. He wore a cherry-black velvet coat with long skirts, a white silk waistcoat damasked in floral patterns, black velvet smallclothes, a burst of Flemish lace at the throat, opal stickpin, black leather boots, a cocked silver-fretted black satin hat, horseman's cloak and a long foppish black wig. There was a beautiful horn-gripped saber in his sword-belt and he carried a brace of silver-mounted horse pistols. When he examined the coins I gave him, he said, "Not a goblin or stag among 'em!" Those are old thieves' words for sovereign and shilling. I have no theory to offer at this time concerning the man.'

"The state police are alerted and an arrest is expected soon."

We read this item over coffee the next morning. We didn't connect it with our projectile out in the big ditch. We didn't do that for a week. And what we deduced was all wrong even then.

CHAPTER II

ON the tenth of June, after a week more or less quiet, the

highwaymen struck in force. In Arizona, along the hot highways of New Mexico and Nevada, in Utah and as far as California's eastern borders, from dusk till sunup the fantastic bushrangers on their splendid big stallions thundered out of darkness to stop and rob cars, busses, and in one case, a freight train. Their tactics were usually the pile of brush or logs across the stretch of deserted road. Their clothes and weapons were of antique pattern. Their take was generally small; and their expressions were invariably astounded.

"If it's a practical joke," said Pete Ashton, my sidekick and fellow fuel-man, looking up from the morning paper, "it's the most expensive one of all time. Did you read this thing?"

"Huh-uh."

"It estimates the number of men involved at more than eight hundred. Plus a horse for each one. Plus maybe fifteen hundred bucks' worth of costume apiece, and God knows how much for the pistols and swords."

"Hollywood," I hazarded. "Publicity stunt. Big new 4-D pitcher, Rock Brandon in *Forever Ethelberta*. . ."

"Won't hold water. Two men were shot when they objected to being hijacked. Both in critical condition. And think of the law-

suits! Federal government would send up half of Beverly Hills for twenty years." He leveled his gray eyes at me and got that little crease between them that means he's deadly serious. "Look here, Sam, has it occurred to you that possibly, just possibly, we're to blame?"

I caught his idea at once. It was one of those improbable moments when one of us had an idea and with half a dozen words conveyed it to the other in all its intricate, screwball complexity. There wasn't any need to amplify, but just to make some noise while I mulled it over, I said, "You mean we cracked a hole in Time? Reached back two and a half centuries and made a bridge over which these desperate gentry came riding? That what you mean, Verne?"

"That's what I mean, Wells."

"But Burroughs, old chap, you're talking through your space warp." I didn't think he was, but I had to banter and chaff while I looked at the enormous and chaotic contingencies.

"I am, H. Rider, like hell. Free your mind of those yokelish prejudices and listen. Item: although some of the highwaymen are dressed in new clothes, others wear rags at least twenty years old. Where

would they have found paduasoy and velvet jackets that old? Has some eccentric millionaire been planning this for decades?"

"Maybe. Go on."

"Item: nearly all of them expressed wonder at the horseless carriages, and plenty of witnesses swear it was genuine. Item: our currency baffles 'em — truly bewilders 'em, and you can't tell me there are 800 actors good enough to put across a phony surprise at something as common as money."

"It ain't common enough for me," I said. Down at the base of my neck the short hairs were bristling with cold dawning fear of what we might have done.

"Last item that I can think of: that historian, what's-his-name, says that the Norfolk 18th-Century accent could not have been reproduced by anyone other than a handful of specialists. Period. End of theory. I just may be sick all over the waffles."

"I wish," I said slowly, "I wish there was somebody else here to talk it over with. I don't wholly trust our opinions, Pete. Never have since we invented that super-octane gas in chem class our freshman year, and it turned out to be lemonade. We are inclined to go off deep ends with some regularity . . ."

"I'm not suggesting that we can

do a damn thing but talk about it, even if it is true," he said. "We broke the light barrier and whatever's done is done. I'm not going to commit suicide over the thing. I simply say, it was probably us and our blasted fuel and our bloody sclerium that warped, tore, bridged or scrambled the fourth dimension, Time, all to hell. I wish they all hadn't flown to Washington to explain what we did to our beloved Congress. Hang it, there won't be anybody here but soldiers and laborers for a week. What we need is some giant brain to try this on. We may be molehilling like crazy."

"Try the telephone," I said suddenly. "Half the gang are at the same hotel, the Hilstone, and you can get a multiconnection and see what they all think of it. I'll see if the radio has any late news while you talk to 'em."

"You were always the practical one," said Pete admiringly, "while I was the young, tousle-headed dreamer, handsome but awfully ineffectual. Phone it is."

And it was in this way that we discovered that neither the telephone nor the radio was working.

We took them both apart and put them together and couldn't get a murmur out of them, and we swore and sweated in the desert heat, and not once did it occur to us to con-

nect the failure of our communication instruments with the appearance in the American West of eight hundred Georgian gentlemen of the high road.

CHAPTER III

ALONE of the forty-six scientists who worked on Project Pow, Pete and I had stayed behind. We were fuel experts, minor characters in the drama of the long ditch, and everyone else had a doctor's degree tacked on his name and was a VIP to the back teeth. So they'd all been called to Washington to make a special report to Congress, while Pete and I relaxed and twiddled our thumbs for ten days. This was the third day, this morning when the phone and radio went dead.

"Try the lights," I suggested after a while.

They worked all right. "Television," said Pete, and turned it on and fussed with the knobs, and got nothing whatever.

We had a beer and stared at each other, scowling, and then went out to see if any of the work gang or the domestic help could help us. There wasn't a soul around.

"Oh, Lord, they're in Vegas," said Pete. "I forgot, they took the weekend off."

"Let's check on the generators."

Which we did, and of course they were fine, since we did have electricity in all the buildings and only the communications systems were out of whack. So we got in a jeep and drove to the flat furrow, where a company of infantry was quartered, guarding the equipment. They were all there, and I was almighty glad to see them, because things were feeling eerier by the minute.

The captain in charge, Granville, became very unhappy when he heard what was wrong. He was of the infinite - suspicion school. "Damn saboteurs," he said, not explaining why he thought anyone would sabotage our TV. "Corporal, check all the walkie-talkies." The corporal did and they worked handily. "Ought to have a 24-hour guard on that place up there," said the captain, gesturing bitterly toward our living quarters. "All them brains and nobody can light a match on his pants without help. Come on, I'll fix your damn TV."

We three returned to the technicians' quonset and Granville turned on the TV and got a low hum. "Did you think to use this knob?" he asked witheringly. Nothing happened. No picture, just the buzz. He looked slightly less cocky. He fiddled and swore. "Hell," he said, "let's call a serviceman in Vegas."

"You forget the phone's dead too," said Pete mildly.

Granville barked into the mute instrument for three or four minutes, tried to vivify the radio, and began to look a little unsure of himself. "This is nuts," he said. "I've got to go check the radar. No telling what's . . ." He walked out, mumbling. We trailed after him.

The quonsets and the other buildings were erected on a small hill, perhaps a hundred feet higher than the desert flat. About half a mile from the foot of the hill was the north end of the 20-mile ditch. Ringing the entire proving grounds, which was about 24 by 16 miles in perimeter, were much higher hills, and in them, invisible from here, were gun emplacements and ack-ack batteries and a regiment of men under a colonel who knew more about defending a critical area than anyone else in the U. S. A. Project Pow was well and thoroughly protected. But our telephones weren't working, and we didn't know why.

We piled into the jeep and went down to Captain Granville's quarters. He ordered the radar on — an emergency measure, usually it sat there dead and grotesque-looking, for there was a lot of radar equipment up in the hills, going all the time — and we waited.

ONE of the operators came over to us in five minutes. He was

rather green. He stuttered and Granville bleated at him and he got hold of himself and said, "Radar shows a w-w-wall all around us."

"A what?"

"A wall. It goes up from the foot of the h-hills and we can't find the t-top. It's all around us except for over there," said the corporal, pointing to a pass in the range northwest of us. "There's a break in it there. Don't ask me why."

"A wall," said Captain Granville without emotion. "Sure. Okay, dogface, let's take a look." The corporal changed from green to pink. He escorted the three of us to his screen, moodily biting his lip. Granville watched the screen. After a minute he went to another one. Pete Ashton and I stared at each other, wondering. Finally the captain said, "What did you guys do here a week ago, anyway?" His eyes were a little crossed with anxiety.

"We surpassed the speed of light."

"Well, you also fouled up our radar. This soldier's right, it shows a wall all around the proving grounds." We all stared at the perimeter of the flatland and there was obviously nothing above the hills except fresh air and cloudless sky.

"When did you use the radar

last?" I asked the corporal.

"We always test it at seven a. m. sir."

"It was all right this morning?"

"Yes sir."

"Then it wasn't us that did it," Pete said to Granville.

The Captain said a fairly obscene word or two, and looked at the northwest valley where the radar showed no "wall." He said, "Hey!" loudly. We all looked.

It was about three miles off. It looked like a small dark clot of ants. Granville snatched for binoculars and scanned it and without speaking handed the glass to me. The dark clot was a number of horsemen, approaching leisurely along the floor of the pass. There seemed to be a good many of them, and some of them had what looked like plumes in their strangely-shaped hats.

Granville began to scream orders. He didn't pause for any analysis of the problem for our benefit, so I'll never know what he thought was approaching; bluster and all, he was a good soldier, and his job was to defend our equipment and persons from anything that threatened. In spite of cock-eyed radar and plumed headgear and silent guns in the hills, he knew that something which could be classified as *enemy* was coming, and he went out to meet it, with

nearly every man of his company. They went in jeeps, leaving behind only the radar operators, some eight or ten at most. Everyone had a rifle, and the last jeep roared off within two minutes of Granville's first bellow. He was in the forefront.

I watched through the field glass, describing what happened to Pete Ashton.

The dark mass of horsemen spread out and I saw that they were only the van of a great column of riders. They continued to jog forward toward the nearing jeeps.

The corporal on the radar screen nearest me said, "That wall is all around us now. The gap's closed." It was gibberish insofar as I could see. There wasn't any wall.

The jeeps stopped. The horses stopped. After a moment Granville's jeep began to crawl forward and the horsemen wheeled and rode away; all the jeeps started again and the horses picked up speed. There was a distance of about thirty yards between nags and machines. The jeeps barreled along and I expected to see them run between the horses, but oddly they did not diminish the gap. Not a foot, not an inch, if I could judge from three miles off.

The corporal said conversationally, "The wall's gone at the pass

again."

I saw Granville waving his hands for more speed and the jeeps tore over the sand and by God, I thought, now they'll be among 'em, now we'll see what happens; but nothing happened except that the horses stayed in front by the same thirty yards. I could fairly hear Granville curse at his driver.

They entered the valley, all of them, vast pack of riders and jeeps alike. I handed the glass quickly to Pete, having hogged it long enough. He told me what happened.

"You're right, they aren't catching up, and they must be doing — I won't even guess what they're doing. Sixty? No horse can do it. Not over sand for minutes and minutes . . . Now they're curving left. Must be close to a thousand in that mob. Why doesn't Granville shoot at 'em?"

"They haven't done anything but approach the field."

"That's reason enough to shoot and query later. Now the first horses are out of sight. Lord, I wish I was up there! I wish I could see this close up . . . There goes the last horse out o' sight behind the hill. There go the jeeps." In a minute he lowered the binoculars and handed them to me. "If we're right, and these gentry were called

over a Time bridge by our pottering with velocities, Sam," he said slowly, "why are they all mounted on horses that outrun the best jeeps in America? And how come they're all highwaymen? Wouldn't some plain honest citizens trickle through? What did we tap with the calefite and sclerium, Newgate Gaol?"

"Don't ask me, Bradbury."

"I'm just rhetoricalizing, Van Vogt. Don't expect answers. Why hasn't some poor gin-peddler ambled into Reno? Why aren't there weavers, tinkers, beaux, oval-windowed coaches, comb-makers, gypsies leading dancing bears, fops, beggars shamming disease, and ladies in silks and powders, all plumped down into Flagstaff and Cottonwood and Albuquerque? Why only scamps o' the road, highway levelers, the gentlemen of the saber and horse pistols?"

I refused to think. I put up the binoculars again in time to see the first horses reappear in the gut of the pass. They were heading straight for me and I couldn't judge speed worth a whoop. On they came, like a fantastic charge of an unimaginable light brigade. But they weren't stormed at with shot and shell; they were quite unmolested.

I caught glimpses of jeeps behind them. Granville's bunch, still

chasing like Keystone Kops after crazily-costumed extras. The horsemen came out onto the open plain and canted off right and I could see that the jeeps were now a good sixty or seventy yards behind. The horses drew up and several detached from the main body and trotted out to stand waiting. Granville stood up in the front jeep, for all the world like a cavalryman standing in his stirrups.

One of the riders raised his arm and I saw that he held a pistol in it. There was a small puff of black smoke. Granville swayed and pitched sideways out of the jeep. I would have bet ten dollars on the sick-making certainty that he was dead before he hit sand.

The radarman said quietly, "That wall's there again. Not a blank-blank break in it anywhere. We got a topless wall around us, Mister Scientist, sir."

The jeep in which Granville had been riding stopped cold. Its nose looked as if it were telescoping into itself for no reason. The two men in it rose up as its rear lifted, flung toward me, and dropped onto the shattered hood. The same thing happened to a second vehicle. The others braked to teeth-jolting stops.

Soldiers piled out and their rifles were in their hands. Some of them flung themselves prone and others stood in rifle-range stand-

ing position. They looked as though they were firing into the brown of the highwaymen jerking with the recoil of their rifles.

There was only one catch to this idea. No rider fell, no horse kicked and screamed at the impact of a jacketed slug.

Oh, yes. There wasn't any noise either. They were rather less than three miles away, but I couldn't hear a single rifle-crack.

The soldiers continued to go through their mad, silent motions. The thousand horsemen turned and trotted easily across the desert toward our big ditch.

I handed the binoculars to Pete.

"Wall's still there," said the corporal. "What do you make of it, anyway?"

I couldn't tell him. I couldn't even think. I had the suspicion that I had suddenly gone stark, staring insane.

Pete fulfilled his promise of the early morning, and was sick as a dog all over the sand of Project Pow.

CHAPTER IV

WE waited in an unformed row for them. We had decided against a violent reception; after all, eleven of us and such a mob of them. . .

There were eight radar operators and a cook who hadn't gone into Vegas with the rest because of a headache. There was Pete Ashton, and there was me. Quite an army.

The horsemen drew up a little distance off, and two of them moved out toward us. One was tall, as tall as me, with a fair face and a black wig; his clothing was beautiful, velvet and satin, and I had the feeling I'd seen him before. Then I remembered the newspaper description of the first highwayman, he who'd bushrangered the Blackbird bus. I saw the opal stickpin in the Flemish lace, and knew it was he. The other was fat and small and looked moldy. As though he'd been dug up from potter's field after a bad job of hanging.

The soldiers who'd gone out with Granville were still over at the mouth of the pass. We'd stopped looking at them, because they didn't seem to be doing anything but run back and forth and make indecipherable motions with their hands. The only reasonable theory was that they'd all lost their minds.

The tall horseman removed his black, silver-laced cocked hat and swept it around in a kind of mocking bow and said, "Your servant, gentles all. I have the honor to be Galloping Jonas, king of the royal scamps, and this is my compan-

ion in roguery, Gothic Beall." The moldy one smirked. Two more horses moved up beside them, carrying another pair of characters. "This is Prime Minister William O'Shay, and yonder is Prime Minister Robert Mac Lorn. I must acquaint you further, gentles, that this horse I sit is none other than the famed Tess, who galloped from Lunnon to John o' Groat's in a single night." He paused as if for murmurs of applause.

Nobody said anything for a minute, and then Pete husked and said, "*Two* prime ministers?"

"Assuredly," said Galloping Jonas. "Behind me ride seventeen in all, worthies and gallant scoundrels to a man. Greater thieves than any of us poor honest purse-purloiners, eh?" The whole crowd of them, easily a thousand, set up a kind of hollow, cackling laughter. I took it that Jonas was boss, and if he made a joke, you laughed.

His accent was something frightful. I'd known many Englishmen, but nothing to equal the guttural, mumbling speech that came from Jonas's handsome mouth had I ever heard. I recalled the professor who'd labeled it authentic Norfolk, vintage 1725. You couldn't have proved it by me, but I knew I had to strain and think and guess like the devil to understand his sentences. I can't reproduce them in

print, not with ease anyway. ("Servants," for instance, he pronounced something like "saarnt.")

"Now," he said, sitting back in the saddle, "we've come a deal of distance and we're tired. What inns may there be hereabouts, eh?" He waved a hand languidly at me. "I speak to you, fellow," he said, "knave, scullion, or what ha' ye, you in the ill-begot costume there, I asked you, where might we bed down?"

PALE eyes were fastened on my face and I knew this wasn't the time to ask him questions or to procrastinate unnecessarily. I gestured up the hill toward our quonsets and personnel buildings. "There's shelter," I said, "but not enough beds for so many."

"If it has floors we can sleep in it," said Gothic Beall, the dead-looking one.

"Aye," said Jonas. He turned his horse's head north, and the whole cavalcade got into motion. "Be where I can find ye when I'm rested," he called to us, and passed and disappeared as the concourse filed in behind him. I scanned it as it passed, and for the first time saw that there were women among the riders, several score at least.

"Who are they?" said Pete beside me, and I said, "Doxies, what else?" before I'd even actually re-

membered that I knew the archaic word. "I don't mean the dames," said Pete, "I mean the whole impossible lot of 'em, seventeen prime ministers and all."

"I'll tell you who they are," said the corporal whose name was Kemp. "They're spooks."

"That does seem reasonable," I said.

"I'm not kidding, buster," said Kemp angrily. "I don't suppose you noticed the horses?"

"Terrific chunks of horseflesh," said Pete, staring after the mob.

"Sure, sure." Kemp spat onto the sand. I admired him for that, because my own mouth was dry as snakeskin. "Great big powerful chargers, aren't they? There's only one thing wrong with them." We both looked at him and the cook, Lester, said "What?" and Kemp after a moment told us. I didn't doubt him, because he was anything but an hysterical type, and since his first discovery of the invisible "wall" on radar he hadn't turned a hair.

I devoutly hoped that this would be the last little surprise the day would offer us. After dead telephones, blind TV, crazy radar, the unseeable wall, noiseless shots from Army rifles, a thousand ancient horsemen and 17 prime ministers, horses that outdistanced jeeps, Galloping Jonas and his

accent and his horse pistols, well, my God, I was about ready to knock off. So I hoped that Kemp's revelation would prove to be the finale.

It wasn't, of course; a lot of good men were going to die, and my world was going to rock off its foundations, before the sun set. I didn't know this, though. So I hoped.

What Kemp had said was, "Those horses, chums, ain't alive. I mean they're *dead*. Because why? Because I was watching the big joker's nag all the time he was talking. I was raised in Kentucky and I know horses." He took a deep breath. "That horse, and all the rest of 'em, stamped and shifted and trotted away just as bright as you please, right? Looked just great. Only trouble was, *not a damn one of them was breathing*. Their chests were as still as a rock in the sun. Their sides didn't heave, even after that gallop out there." He looked from Pete to Lester to me. "Them ponies," he said firmly, "are as dead as roast beef sandwiches. There isn't a breath or a heartbeat in the whole stinking stable."

CHAPTER V

"LET'S get over to those soldiers," said Pete shakily. "Not me," said Kemp. There's

something just as wrong over there as there is up here." He waved a hand at the personnel buildings, where a thousand or so horses stood quietly, without a single guard to watch them, without a grain of feed or a single hobble or tied-up rein to keep them from wandering off. Every man and woman of the fantastic horde had vanished into the huts, where they were presumably sleeping, lined up on the hard floors like so many bums in a cheap flophouse. "Look at that," went on Kemp. "They just stand there. You don't have to halter a dead horse. Not a saddle taken off, either. Dead . . . And I ain't going up to the pass, either, because there's something so damn wrong with the boys I don't even want to come close to it."

"What are you going to do?" I asked him.

"Find every rifle and every cartridge I can, and see about settin' up a fort around here somewhere. I got a notion when the play-actors are done sackin,' they'll be looking for us. I'm gonna be ready for them." He stared at us defiantly. "Ten guys with rifles ought to be able to take a thousand with them cap pistols. Even when three of us are civilians."

We left him to search for weapons, and Pete and I, with two soldiers and the cook Lester, took

two jeeps and rattled off toward the pass where the company was still milling about on the sand.

When we'd come within a hundred yards, they'd spotted us and were waiting, some standing alone, others bunched beside the two wrecked jeeps. What in hell had smashed up those hoods so thoroughly? There were three bodies laid out, Granville and two G. I.s.

"Look as if they went full tilt into a stone wall," said Pete. Then he snapped, "Stop!" and automatically I braked to a fast halt. "They did." Pete glanced at me and back to the soldiers. "They did run into a wall. The wall that showed on Kemp's radar. We saw them do it."

He was right and yet, how could you believe it or even think about it? There was nothing out here but desert and a couple of Joshua trees and a little creosote bush and a lot of dry, hot air. I gazed at the crumpled metal of the jeeps and at the soldiers who were grouped so oddly, staring at us silently, and I knew Pete was right but I couldn't believe it. I stood up. "Hey!" I shouted to the infantrymen, who were about 200 feet away. "What happened?"

A dozen mouths flew open, scores of arms gestured wildly. Not a sound came to us through the

bright silent air.

I moved as if I were slogging through a dream, incredulous and skeptical of everything that existed in this insane day. I came within a yard of a private who was yelling at me, quite soundless though I could see his throat muscles strain and bulge; I halted and inch by inch went forward, feet dragging, heart crashing like rhythmic thunder in an aching chest, with my hands before me as if I were blind. And there it was, the wall.

MY hands gradually pressed tight against it, though all my sinews flinched from contact. It was solid and without roughness or flaw, smooth and neither cold nor hot; it went straight up higher than I could reach, it had no ending in the sand but went down, possibly for miles, for I dredged up a heap of sand at its foot with one shoe, and could not discover the bottom of this sight-undiscernible, occulty-reared, quiet impossible wall.

"It must be a mile high," said Pete beside me, and I leaped and said "Aagh!" because I'd been lost in horror. "That's why we can't hear them shouting. What did it, Sam?" He pounded my shoulder with a fist, his face pale and tight with nerves, verging on hysteria. "Did we do it? We

did, didn't we, Sam? With our bloody toys and —"

I slapped him in the face. I meant only to shock him into calm, but strung up like a banjo string myself, I put a lot more force into the blow than I'd intended. It knocked him down.

He came up from the sand at me like a turpentine wolverine. His eyes were bulging and without intelligence. I clipped him on the jaw and he had my neck in his hands. We fell together, while Lester and the two radarmen screamed at us. Pete Ashton and I were embarked on the first fight we'd ever had.

I outweighed him, had inches of reach on him, but he was as wiry and rugged as they come. It was anybody's brawl. I took a short hard left in the gut that bent me down and then his fists were bashing me in the face, right and left and right without pause, and I curled over prawnwise to protect my head while lights popped and blazed in my skull and pain shot through me in jolts of ragged fire. I shoved one arm out straight and fast and by good luck connected with his ribs, which pushed him back long enough to let me get a gasp of wind and clear my eyes of hair and blood.

I went after him then. I boxed in college, was on the fencing team

and cross-country too; my 'dozing of the big trench had hardened me to top form. It was like pitting a heavyweight champion against a bantamweight. In two minutes I'd stretched him out flat on his back.

He raised his face and stared at me. We heaved for air, glaring madly, and then slowly the anger and ferocity went out of both of us. I put out a hand and he took it and I set him on his feet.

"Damned if you aren't a fighting cock when you're aroused, boy," I said. I gave him a handkerchief for his nosebleed. We began to laugh.

There was no more sense in the laughter than there'd been in the fight; but the two of them saved our reason, I'm sure. Till that quick raging tangle we'd been getting stiffer with fear, more appalled at the unknown and the unbelievable, till we were both ready to crack wide open. The violence purged us, the laughing knitted us back together again.

FROM that moment on, the wild adventure might scare us, it might maim and destroy us, but it could not drive us into insanity or cowardice. We'd eased the tension in the oldest way—the good animal way, by scrapping — forgetting to think and just mixing it up. From there on, we quit rack-

ing our brains needlessly for explanations of each new idiocy of the universe; we took what came and fought it as we would have fought, say, a normal attack by an enemy in war.

I thank God for Pete Ashton, as I know he did for me.

Lester and the others were standing around us, not precisely grinning, but looking as if they might at any second. After the first amazement, they'd enjoyed our tussle. I think they felt some relief themselves. "Mister Black," said the cook, "what is this wall, anyway?" Which brought us back to our problems, but with clearer (if pretty well bashed up) heads.

"I think it's some kind of force field," I said, with dim memories of such things in long-ago reading. "It's beyond anything our government can have set up, and I'd say that went for any other country's science, too. I don't know what put it here. It's possible that some reaction to our busting the light barrier caused it. If it did, I can't explain it any more than you can."

Pete, mopping up gore absently, asked the radar operators, "You couldn't find the top of it, could you?"

"No sir."

"Might it be that there's a roof too? That we're really caged into a walloping big room, 24 miles by

16?"

"Could be, sir. We didn't try 'em straight-up."

"We'll have to do that. Out of sheer curiosity." He gave me the handkerchief, which I took one look at and dropped into a creosote bush. We both put our palms flat against the unseen wall.

On the other side, the company of soldiers, who had crowded close to watch the fight, shifted backward a little; and one man, a short red-headed fellow, put his hands against the wall opposite my own. There was no pressure communicated through the barrier, but so far as I could see, our hands were actually touching one another. Pete got his head as close as possible to them and said, "Looks as though the thing isn't any thicker than a sheet of paper. By the way, Sam, you get any sensation?"

"I hadn't noticed it." Then it did seem to me that a tingling, a very minor charge as of slight electrical leakage, was noticeable. I told him. "Yeah. It's a force field of some kind, Sam, there's no doubt." He shook his head. "How it ties in with Galloping Jonas and seventeen prime ministers, I refuse to guess."

We left the infantry, mute and impotent to help us beyond their great transparent mystery and slowly rolled back to the proving

grounds.

The horses still stood patiently on the hill. No highwaymen were in evidence yet. We looked for Kemp, couldn't see him. There was a row of tents near the launching platform, in which the soldiers had lived until today. I started at one end and Pete at the other, peering into each one, looking for the absent Kemp and his four colleagues. In the third tent I inspected, there was a girl. She was asleep, she was lovely, and of all the impossible things that had occurred this day, she was the most unlikely!

CHAPTER VI

SHE wore a gown of carnation velvet, silver cloth shoes and embroidered stockings; a diamond-headed bodkin was thrust casually through the front curls of her dark hair. Her skin was creamy, the lashes of her closed eyes very long and heavy. Her low-cut bodice was beautifully filled, and her waist was as slim as Scarlet O'Hara's. She looked strangely normal to me, as she lay there on the army cot with her red lips a little parted . . . Of course she seemed normal! She resembled at least forty jackets off the historical novels in our library. You could see her counterpart being wooed by Rock Brandon on a thousand movie screens across

the country tonight. She was Nell Gwyn, or possibly Amber . . .

She was too good. "Mirage," I muttered huskily, and reached out to touch her on the cheek, with perfectly decent motives of reassuring myself of her substantiality; and found my wrist caught in a biting grip, and the point of the long deadly bodkin pressed gently to my palm. "Whoa!" I yelped. "I only wanted —"

"What every man wants," she said, using a quite unprintable word instead of *man* however. Her opened eyes were dark blue and coldly angry. "I ought to run you through the hand for a lesson." Then she let me go and leaned back, sighing; but kept the rapier-like hairpin ready. "I expected Jonas," she said. "Not one o' you culls. What lock d'ye cut, anyway?"

"Beg your pardon?" I said, sitting down on a camp stool.

"What d'ye do?" she said impatiently. "What lay are you on? How do you earn your living, for the love of heaven?"

"I'm a fuel expert."

"What, you sell wood?"

"No, not quite that. I —" and I stopped. What could I tell the wench in her own language that would explain calefite to her? Probably nothing. I tried. "I work on oils and vapors and gasses which we put into ships to make

them travel quickly. Not on the water, but through the air, and perhaps through the far sky to other worlds."

There was one instant when I believed I saw a dozen emotions chase themselves through her lovely great eyes: astonishment, comprehension, unbelief and horror, but overpowering all of them, an intelligent *knowledge* of what I meant. The next moment she was jeering, "When did you crawl out of Bedlam, honey?" and her eyes were flat and unreadable, and I thought I had mistaken the things I'd seen.

We spoke, she in the cant and jargon of 18th-Century London, I in as basic an English as I could manage; and I tried to tell her what I did here, what Project Pow was all about, even something about the light barrier. It was suddenly necessary that I tell this fullblown girl about myself. And such a need I hadn't felt since early college days.

Then, when I asked her where she came from and what date it was, she was silent; and the guttural growl of Galloping Jonas came over my shoulder. "I've been scouring for ye, Barbary," said he. I jumped up, turning, and the muzzle of a pistol waved me aside. "What are you telling my doxy, hick?"

TAKING it that hick signified the same thing to him as it did to me, I was going to smack him; but Barbary, the girl, was quicker than I. She was off the cot and clawing for his eyes and he had to holster the gun and use both hands to fend her off. "Neither your doxy, nor anyone else's!" she was yelling. Jonas backed, grinning, and her fingers caught at the long full foppish black wig and tore it down off the front of his head, bringing the cocked hat with it, so that he was blinded for a few seconds.

Now if this had happened an hour before, I suppose I wouldn't have done a thing. I'd been awed to the point of inaction by all the insanity of the day. But Pete and I had shucked off our awe and wanted to do something; besides which, I liked this girl Barbary. And I didn't care two cents for Mister Galloping Jonas and his good, dead nag, Tess.

One step took me to his side, and while he swore, muffled in the great periwig, I snatched both the horse pistols from his belt and reversed them so that when he emerged, gasping and red in the face, from the fallen mass of curls, he found himself covered by his own guns. They were flintlocks, and I had only a hazy idea of how to fire them. But I was ready to try.

"Curse blight ye," said Jonas very quietly, and the ridiculous phrase came out as a dire threat from his hard lips. He was shaved as bald as a cue ball, and the loss of the black wig turned him into a far more evil figure than I could have imagined. He moved slowly toward me. I cocked the pistols.

There was a painful sharp prick in my right ear. "Hand 'em back to him," said Barbary, "or you'll get six inches of pin through your brains, cully." Meekly I held out the pistols to Jonas. I felt certain that the wench was not joking. The pain withdrew from my ear as Jonas tore the weapons out of my hands. "And you, Jonas," said she, "may I suggest you don't spatter his guts on the wall till we're surer of where we are, eh?"

Jonas gave a brief growl and holstered the guns and picked up his wig and hat, brushed them off tidily and adjusted them to his bare skull. "Aye. When I've done with him, though, he'll crave a lead pill in the noggin as he craves salvation! Now come out o' here, we've work to do." He dived out onto the sand, and the treacherous, ungrateful Barbary followed him swiftly. I went after them. I was much angrier at the outlandish, out-of-Time wench than I really had any reason or right to be.

CHAPTER VII

THERE were about forty highwaymen standing among the tents. I looked for Pete Ashton, saw him with Lester and a couple of soldiers, and walked over to them.

"What's the matter, Sam, did Jonas catch you with his girl?" asked Pete.

"All very innocent," I said, "and she wound up pushing a knife in my ear." I squinted around through the dry, steaming air. "Where's Kemp got to?" He and six other radarmen were missing.

"I dunno," said Pete, "but I'll bet he's fixing himself a fort somewhere, and I wish we were with him. It looks like all hell is ready to bust loose."

The visitors were scowling and talking excitedly, and even though a lot of them were within earshot, I couldn't understand their growling speech; they had to go almighty slow to be intelligible to me. I saw Galloping Jonas speaking earnestly with Barbary, while the moldy-looking Gothic Beall listened with his fat face bunched up worriedly. Figuring I could comprehend Barbary better than the others, I strolled toward them, trying to look innocuous.

Well, I caught two or three sentences, the words "oils, gas, other

worlds" — then Jonas broke in, "Have you your lexicon?" and Barbary dug into her skirts and handed him a small scarlet-covered book. He thumbed it, muttering. Then he said, quite clearly, "Ah, 'tis zaminfler and fufre, as I recollected!" I had only time to wonder what outlandish items might fufre and zaminfler be, when the repellent Beall turned his head and saw me. "Come here," he said, crooking a dirty finger. I stepped over to them. Pete was behind me, and I heard him murmur, "Ten bucks says you can't steal that book," before Jonas' hateful voice thundered an astonishing question at me.

"On what world were ye born?"

"This one," I said automatically; then thinking I had misunderstood him, or his meaning, "America."

Jonas squinted at me as if he wouldn't have believed me on the well-known stack of Good Books. "Are ye trying to tell me you were born *here*? Then your ancestors —"

"Here, and some generations back, England."

"This isn't England?" he said, eyes popping. Barbary clapped a hand over her lush mouth, and Gothic Beall turned a putty shade.

"Certainly not. It's America, and the year's 1963."

"Yes, it would be," he muttered,

and the astonishing implications of that statement had time only to begin sinking into my brain when he went on: "Are things so different in America, then, from England? I refer not to the landscape, which is unholy enough to bristle your back teeth, but —" he gestured at my clothes the radar installations, the launching platform in the distance — "whence all this? Answer me, ye jumbling maunder?"

"Whence your seventeen prime ministers?" I rapped back at him. "Whence horses that don't breathe?"

And at that instant, before he could either reply or haul out his horse pistols to blast me, as he looked mad enough to do, there came the loveliest sound in the world. It was the flat hard crack of a rifle.

A highwayman who was standing a dozen feet off swayed, opened his mouth to speak, and pitched on his face in a flurry of satin and ostrich feathers.

JONAS roared, "Get t'others!" and made one magnificent leap and landed in the saddle of his good nag Tess, who had been standing beside him, placidly shifting from hoof to hoof and not breathing. Beall and the rest ran for their horses, leaving Pete and me and Lester and the GIs. Also leaving

Barbary, who'd evidently mislaid her mount. She looked swiftly around her as the place erupted, another shot came and a second gentleman of the road hit the sand; horses were plunging and leaping over the tent ropes, one charged full tilt into a tent and brought it down, recovered balance and galloped on, and still Barbary could not locate an empty saddle. Then she screamed, because I had grabbed her firmly and energetically by the waist.

"What a time for passion," said Pete, looking around to see if he could spot the rifleman. "Hot-blooded ol' Sam!"

"Funny man," I barked, "where'd those slugs come from?"

"The ditch," said Lester, the cook. "Lookat there, they've got a barricade in the big ditch!"

"Come on," I said, and hoisted Barbary off her feet, tucked her squirming body under my arm, and ran.

Now the great trench was, as I've said, twenty miles long and 60 yards wide. Here at the end of it, it was sunk into the earth a depth of about four feet (3.875, to be exact; how well I remember those blueprints). Running at our best speed, the little knot of us pounded into it down a runway at the side of the launching platform; and 200 yards away were

the trucks.

It was just here that I believed someone had shot me in the tail. Talk about fiery, lancing pains . . . I dropped Barbary on the concrete and swore, touching myself tenderly to see if I was actually half shot away; and the wench rolled over and grinned up at me, waving that damned diamond-headed bodkin cheerfully. "Think yourself lucky I didn't put it through your spine," she jeered, and then I'd kicked it out of her hand, ungently, and wrestled her up and was dragging her, kicking and trying to bite, toward the trucks.

Once I looked over my shoulder. Jonas and his crew were just pouring down the hillside from the quonsets, all thousand or so of them. Knowing how those could go, I wasn't sure I could cover the remaining hundred yards before they flashed over that half-mile between me and them. If I dropped Barbary — but I wouldn't. I wanted her; as hostage, maybe, as the carrier of a small scarlet book, certainly, and even with my rump smarting from her wicked stab, I wanted her because she was herself, a glorious, wild, impossible dame.

Love? That fast? That's for storybooks. But attraction — oh,

man, yes!

So I kept tight hold on her, and I ran, staggering with the pain, panting, down the hard floor of the big ditch.

THE others had reached the trucks, were climbing in. Pete glanced back, saw me in difficulties. At once he was hammering back toward me, yelling.

"Drop her, you dope! You'll never make it!" He didn't know I was wounded, thought I was simply tired and burdened with Barbary. "Help me with her," I gasped as he reached us. "She's important." He took my word for it, snatched her left arm, I had her right and then we were hauling her between us, her toes dragging and banging a tattoo on the concrete.

Jonas at the head of his fast-recruited mob was halfway to the launching platform.

The trucks seemed to be a hell of a distance off.

Horses going at 70 m. p. h.?

The world, or maybe I, had really gone off its rocker.

We were almost there. The near truck loomed up sidelong, just ahead now, and I tried to speed up and fell over my feet and dragging Barbary, screeching malignancies, down atop me. Pete left her go, still not convinc-

ed that she ought to be held; he started to help me up and Barbary shot away on all fours like a great fancy animal escaping an open trap. I twisted and coiled to go after her; Pete's well-meaning fumbling at me held me back for a moment. Then I was sprinting like a miler, aching wound clean forgotten. We did perhaps forty yards and then I launched out and tackled her around the thighs. We hit the iron-hard floor of the trench as though we'd been projected out of a circus cannon.

Barbary looked at me and touched her raw-scraped cheek, and I'm blasted if she didn't grin. "You're a rare cully," she said. I took it as tribute, smiled back at her, then gripped her very hard by that perfect twenty-inch waist and yanked her to her feet.

One fast look told me that Jonas' boys were nearly to the ditch.

Bellowing at Pete to get on to the trucks, I began staggering back with the girl, who was once more wriggling snakily and swatting at me with raking fingernails.

I sort of doubted that I'd make it this time.

PETE was in the truck, leaning over the side with arms out toward me and face all one sick worried expression. I could hear the no-longer-muted thunder of the dead horseflesh coming up behind, not in the ditch, for concrete would have made a very different sound, but along the sides. Should I chuck the girl down? Hell, after this long . . . I gathered myself and made a sort of flying pounce at the truck. Hurling Barbary up to Pete, who took her under the arms and jerked her over the side, I clambered up myself just as the first shot whanged out at me from the pistols of that pale-eyed anachronism, Galloping Jonas.

He missed — not by much, I think — I heard steel ring at the impact of the slug, and then I was topping the side, falling on my shoulder inside. Instantly I had whirled and was taking a rifle from the hands of Corporal Kemp. His tough face smirked briefly into mine.

"I seen skirt-crazy guys in my time, mister, but you're the limit. The real brass-plated limit."

Then we were firing into the press.

They came streaming along both sides of the big furrow, their horses slowed now to almost normal horse-

speed, and like Indians around a circle of wagons, they fired in, whooping, as they passed and turned to arc back and come at us again. Jonas had gone, was out of sight somewhere on the desert behind his lines of weird henchmen.

Kemp had done a beautiful job of arranging the trucks. They were of several types, small vans used for carrying material, and pickups with varying side heights, low to fairly high. He'd driven them, he and his men, down here into the ditch, parking them in a rough circle, six trucks with a seventh right in center to which it might be necessary to retreat if things got hot. Kemp must have seen a lot of old Western movies . . . and it *was* a good arrangement.

Kemp, Pete, Ashton, Barbary and I were in a pickup whose sides were about two feet high. The eight others were scattered among three more pickups, with the two vans broadside to the ramparts of the trench. Our three rifles poured lead into the advancing horde, while the GIs fired as they passed and retreated.

Barbary, about the time I was letting off my fourth shot, decided that she'd join her compatriots. She hoisted herself to her feet and was about to jump to the ground when I grabbed for her ankles. She dodged back, grinned, and then shrieked;

flopped flat beside me, swearing coarsely.

"What happened, baby?" I asked, thinking she'd been shot.

"Some obscenitied vulgar word put a blanked pill through my strammel," she said, her face pale and eyes raging. "Near sliced my nab, the so-and-so!" Digging the strange cant words from the oaths, I deduced that a bullet had gone through her hair, close to the scalp. "Keep yourself down, then," I told her, "or your pals will be burying you tomorrow."

"They'll carve your guts long afore then," she said. A charming child. Sighing, I turned my back on her and took up the sharpshooting again.

NOW I had done more than a little shooting in my time. Ducks on the farm, crows at extreme range, deer and rabbit in college days; my eye is pretty average good. I found that to knock a man off a horse when he's coming obliquely at you at forty yards is not too difficult a trick. Pete said afterwards that he hadn't hit one in three; Kemp had a rifleman's medal and probably did as well as I, so in the first dozen minutes of the highwaymen's wild charge I suppose we must have killed and wounded a total of 150 between us. Had they been charg-

ing directly at us, we'd have been mincemeat within seconds; as it was they were practically sitting ducks.

They banged away at us with a will, but did no damage at all. This was no reflection on their marksmanship, of course; just try hitting a small target forty yards off, using a flintlock pistol charged with old-style black powder, while sticking to a galloping horse.

Then they drew off to the desert, and, presuming they were out of range, held a council.

"Look," said Kemp, lifting himself to his knees and gesturing. "What about them?" He was pointing at the dead, an unholy lot of them, still and stiffening in their finery.

"What about 'em?" said Pete.

"No horses. Not one bloody horse lying cold, or even screaming with a wound. I told you, they're all dead."

I happened to look at Barbary as he said it, and saw her grimace at him evilly.

What in hell *was* the answer?

Kemp shouted, "You guys okay back there?"

The soldiers answered. Two were shot, one dying. "Not so bad," said Kemp without emotion. "Score the first round to Uncle Sam's pride." He must have seen something disapproving in my face. "What's the

matter, doc," he said sourly. "d' you still think you're fighting human beings? You figure them bodies are *people*?" He laughed briefly and took a bead on the distant enemy; shot, and one fell. "Come on, shoot," he said. "The only way we'll finish this fight on our feet is if we knock over every damn one of 'em." Feeling that he was right, and deliberately conquering my prejudice against potting fish in a barrel, I began to fire slowly and carefully.

My bodkin-stab gave a twinge. It reminded me of Barbary. I glanced over at the wench, and saw her lowering herself silently over the side. I caught a wrist in time, pulled her up and shook her ferociously. "I'll have to tie you up," I said.

"Oh, don't do that," she said, alarmed. "I'll be good, I'll stay." She looked anxiously at me. "Word o' honor," she said.

What the devil did it matter, anyway? "All right," I said. "But give me that red book now."

She backed away across the truck, shaking her head. In no mood to fool, I went after her, snatched her arms, held both with one hand and searched through the carnation velvet gown with the other. She bit and wriggled, as usual. She was a powerful woman and an angry — or frightened? —

one, but finally I held the small volume in my palm. Then I let her go, and she sank to her knees, shivering with fear or suppressed rage.

I knelt beside Pete Ashton and before I started firing again I said, "There was a matter of a bet." I handed him the book. "You owe me ten bucks," I said.

CHAPTER IX

THEY came again, but this time they had learned caution.

As they deployed, many of them on foot, I put one slug into a horse. I took keen aim and could almost hear the lead thunk into its chest. And absolutely nothing happened.

Spread in a long line to our left, about a hundred highwaymen ran at us, bent over into small targets. When they had nearly reached the side of the trench, a mob of horsemen, who had recrossed farther down, came galloping and yelling at us from the right.

Letting Pete take the foe on foot, Kemp and I concentrated on the riders. I sprawled a big ugly devil over his horse's tail and knocked a slim fop sideways to be dragged in his stirrup, saw Gothic Beall and aimed at him but missed; then they were at the lip of the ditch and instead of canting off to

go along its edge, they lifted their nags into the air and flew at us in a cresting wave of velvet and satin and steel and broad unbreathing horseflesh.

Now no charger, be he living or as dead as last year's television comic, can jump twenty yards through the air and land on a pickup truck while maintaining his balance and keeping his rider in the saddle. I realized this in the split second when I saw them all rising from the ground; and that tiny bit of hope kept me from panicking. I shot very fast and put two men out of the brawl while the nags were still dropping; then as they touched concrete, with a jarring clangor like insane thunder, I killed a man with a beefy, ruddy face who was just going to fall out of his seat anyway. I was a little sorry I'd done it — it was too much like kicking a fellow who's teetering on a cliff — for as they hit, more than half of the horses fell forward, spilling their masters onto the floor of the big ditch.

"See 'em go!" roared somebody, I think Kemp. "No Kentucky trotter 'ld be that clumsy, by God!"

Perhaps the highwaymen had never leaped their mounts into a depression before that day. I don't know. Certainly they had called on their eerie beasts to perform a fairly simple stunt; but neither men

nor animals could have been at all used to it, because even the nags who kept their feet lost their riders.

That was the only thing that saved us in that second attack.

The scamps on foot were racing toward us from the other side, now standing and firing their flintlocks, now dashing forward, heedless of those who dropped beside them. The foremost reached the lip, jumped down and were piled in writhing heaps by the Army rifles of Kemp and his men. I ploughed a bullet into one of them, who was aiming at us from an uncomfortably close distance, and switched back to the erstwhile horsemen.

These were in sad case. There were broken bones among them, and a number of stunned; I believe the heart was out of them even before we began to take toll at the deadly range.

THEY attacked bravely enough, but now, with the trucks looming over them and heavy rifles crashing without letup, they had small chance. I fired, moved the muzzle slightly, fired . . . then an automatic weapon began chattering beside me. It was Kemp with a Thompson sub — and that did it. They collapsed like tenpins, like rag dolls, like 18th-Century highwaymen under 20th-Century firepower. My Lord, it was brutal.

When Barbary screamed and buried her face in her skirt, I could hardly blame her, for I'd have liked to do the same thing.

The sounds of gargling, dying men sickened me to the soul. I shot a man who was coming up over the side, saw his face go all to strawberry-colored jam, and his hands whiten on the truck and cling desperately for seconds before his carcass fell off. I saw a fellow whom I recognized as Prime Minister William O'Shay, and as he leveled a gigantic pistol at my head from ten feet away, I shot him in the chest, and watched him jolt backward and spin around and collapse on the concrete. Then they started to snatch at bridles, and haul themselves into the saddles, panicky and pale, and I couldn't have killed another if my life hung in the balance.

Kemp, sensibly enough, I suppose, fed them another burst before they had pounded away down the trench to temporary safety.

The men who had been running at us fled now too, appalled by the chattering Thompson.

The nine of us still on our feet at the beginning of that second charge had accounted for an estimated 175 highwaymen.

"What a beastly, bloody butchery," said Pete Ashton, dabbing at his face with a handkerchief,

where a bullet had torn his cheek and ear. Kemp called impassively, "How many still with us?" and Lester, the cook, shouted from out of sight somewhere, "Two here." Altogether, four answered, accounting for six. Nine still okay.

A soldier in the truck opposite ours in the circle, who was facing toward the south end of the ditch, cried that a lot of the enemy were getting down the walls into our flat furrow. We all stood up to look. They were descending on foot, letting the horses follow slowly and avoiding the catastrophe of the previous charge. Kemp reconnoitered, said that there seemed to be no subsidiary force forming, and ordered everybody into the south trucks. "And I suggest that you bash this dame on the skull and leave her here," he said pointedly to me. "I don't trust her with all these guns lyin' loose."

I looked at Barbary. "Give me your parole?" I asked. "You won't try to use them on us?"

She looked at me for a long moment before she slowly nodded. "Trust me," she said quietly. Damned if I know why I did, but I did.

As we climbed down into the center of the circle the last thing I saw was her white face, very proud and hating; behind her rose the groans and faint calls of the sorely wound-

ed highwaymen in the ditch.

We got into the truck that faced south. It had high steel sides behind which we could stand upright, only stooping a little, about as safe as legionnaires behind stone parapets — which is to say that only a well-aimed or a chance shot in the head would hit us. There were six of us in this vehicle and three in the one to our right. About five score of the enemy were massed in the trench, just within range of our rifles. Kemp and several others began shooting methodically and swiftly as the weird mounts that did not breathe or feel bullets moved into a canter and then a gallop toward us.

Suddenly there was a crash from immediately in back of us, and Lester, the cook, grunted and slammed forward, struck the steel and slid to the floor, twitching feebly. *Barbary*, I thought, and even as I turned to shoot her, felt my stomach turn over with nausea. I felt a powerful attraction for the lying, murderous wench . . . and I was going to put a bullet in that lovely breast.

Thank God, it hadn't been *Barbary*! One of the wounded highwaymen had managed to crawl under the trucks behind us and lever himself up over the side to loose off a horse pistol; as I brought my muzzle around to take

him, his mouth fell open and he disappeared. Dead, I suppose, before he hit — his last dying act the tug at the trigger.

Kemp, cursing, sent one of his men into the middle truck to guard our rear. "And if that thing in skirts so much as shows her kisser, blast it," he said between his teeth.

Then we turned and took the charge of the suicide squadron.

CHAPTER X

NOW this was the most terrible, the most terrifying attack of the day. They came at us at a speed that I would judge somewhere between fifty and seventy miles an hour. I was far too busy with the gun to think consciously of the fantastic elements of all this: but underneath I'm sure I was icy with fear of horses that could easily outdistance the fastest thing on legs, the cheetah. But as I say, there was no time to exclaim *what can they be* to myself . . .

As I pumped slug after slug into the riders, I saw that when a horse lost its man, it shot off to one side or the other, and came to a skidding halt by the sides of the ditch, so that the main attack, which was about thirty yards broad at its van, was not snarled by riderless nags. Somewhere there was a tremendous intelligence at

work.

The courage of the rogues was magnificent. How does that old poem go — "Stormed at with shot and shell, boldly they rode and well" — it might have been written for Jonas' lads.

They came at our trucks with no slacking of the speed, and I felt rather than saw Kemp drop his rifle and pick up the submachinegun. In a second it began belching death at them. Still they came, and now the horses were lifting once more in a great leap that took them soaring over us; and at the top of that jump the men launched themselves sidelong out of the saddles and fell among us, so many six-foot projectiles of human flesh, guns holstered and hands reaching out for us.

If a man opened a car door and leaped when the auto was tearing along at 50 per, he wouldn't hit what he was aiming for, nor would he survive the crazy jump. It was just as bad, this wild try of theirs to overwhelm us by dropping atop us from rocketing demons shaped like horses. It was not their main plan, though, it was a kind of furious kamikaze attack, in the wake of which came the true storming of the bastions.

The ranks behind had gradually slowed until they rode at an almost normal speed; possibly thirty

horses flew over us, or struck the sides of the trucks and crumpled down out of sight. Then, as bodies fell among us, some of them knocking our men left and right, the second line came to thundering halt and those horsemen fired at us, standing in stirrups and blazing away with flintlocks in every fist. The inside of the truck was pure hell, a racket of grisly sound as shrieks and groans rose from a thrashing, milling chaos of broken bodies. A dozen or more of the hurtling figures had dropped into our particular fortress from the soaring animals. The couple who were not killed or knocked out were grappling with soldiers, and the lead hail ripped in among us with fine impartiality.

KEMP was down, whether dead or dying I did not know. I felt a hot whine go along my cheek, knew I was shot though how badly I couldn't tell, and bending, snatched the Thompson gun from the floor and shoved it over the side. Luckily I knew the principle of the weapon, though I'd never held one before. I let the highwaymen have a burst, muzzle swiveling at the level of their chests, and cut into the second rank as the first crumpled. Rifles began banging again beside me, and I heard Pete Ashton yell, and abruptly my weapon was

empty.

"Get down here," said Kemp clearly through the melee. I knelt, and he told me how to reload, his voice full of pain. "Damn shoulder's broke," he said. "Get up and give 'em the works."

I got up and gave 'em the works. The truck behind me was a jumble of corpses, in which one or two stirred weakly. I could half-see Pete on my right, and at least one soldier was still firing away on the left. The enemy was climbing in at us from saddles and from the ditch and once and again I had to step briskly back and fire from the hip as a contorted face topping a waving hand full of pistol came over the steel at me.

Then the gun was empty once more and this time I could not reload, for a wave of foemen, like pirates over a bulwark, swept across the side. Clubbing the weapon, I swept it around my head, bellowing hoarse oaths half-consciously. I knew I was done for and I wanted to take every man-jack of them along with me to Hell.

The only crashes now were occasional pistol-shots. We were all fighting with rifles and submachineguns clubbed; I felt that I was going down in a sea of arms, faces, and blue velvet; my arms ached, and my throat was parched and gritty. I was bloody . . .

I let the last man have a crack on the side of the head that catapulted him heels over head on a heap of carcasses, and by thunder, he *had* been the last, for suddenly I was standing alone!

The great ditch was a perfect charnel-house, with the undying horses struggling up its sides and single-footing it off toward the depleted main body, who had camped a long way off over the desert and hadn't made a move to back up this attack. There were wounded, though not so many as you'd expect, since most of the shooting had been very close-range work indeed. I leaned over and killed a man who was keening horribly, did it as callously as dammit with a heavy crack on the head with the sub's butt; then looked for my comrades.

Pete Ashton, praise be, was alive, and climbing up from the ground to check on me. He'd been knocked over the side by some highwayman's onslaught. His only wound was a bruised back and head.

Kemp had a broken shoulder, a really wicked shatter, having been hit by a hurtling fellow and smashed against the truck. Two other soldiers had survived, both with minor gunshot wounds, I had a torn cheek (so had Pete from the first attack) and a nearly spent slug had gone through my shirt and

broken the skin over my breastbone.

FIVE of us, then, were living. Perhaps six hundred highwaymen remained across the sand, if you included the women.

"Let's get back to the north side," said Kemp, wincing as he stood up. "Bandages 'nd stuff over there." We all crossed the corpse-littered open space, in which a couple of horses stood silently, unmoving, left by their fellows; and we clambered into our first truck, and with small surprise I saw that Barbary was gone.

There was no sign of another sortie forming. Pete and I did what we could to help Kemp's shoulder — it was little enough, a matter of binding it in the most comfortable position, for we were no physicians, nor first-aid men either — and dabbed our own gashes with sulfa powder. As we finished, I heard a scratching at the truck-body, and reached out for a rifle. Barbary came over and slipped down onto the floor beside me.

"Where the hell were you?" I asked too amazed at her appearance to be intelligent.

She touched the diamond-headed hairpin thrust into her front curls. "Were out finding this chiv, cully, and putting some good fellows out o' their pain," she said. There was

blood on her skirt, drying in very thin streaks where she'd wiped the bodkin after stabbing heaven knows how many of her countrymen. I knew it had been mercy on her part, but how cold, how cold a mercy!

And yet she did not repel me. She was a child of her wretched civilization, and probably not many of her fellow camp followers would even have bothered themselves to kill an agnoized man out of pity.

"Why'd you come back?" I asked her.

She looked at me straight. "I gave you my word," she said. From a modern man it would have been sheer ham. From this fantastic, lovely anachronism, it was simple truth.

I think that was when I rose above my infatuation with her gorgeous body, and began to fall really in love with her.

CHAPTER XI

WE waited through the afternoon, and no attack materialized.

I could not think myself into the abstruse mind of Galloping Jonas, so I did not know whether he was appalled at his losses, or merely waiting till dark to launch a final attack which must inevitably succeed, even against our vastly super-

rior weapons.

At any rate, long before he was ready to do anything, there came an interruption that was first terrifying, and then horrible

I had quite forgotten that beyond this trench and this flatland were an uncounted mass of allies. In the hills were a regiment of soldiery under a colonel as tough and smart as they come. Beyond these was America. Yet in the past hours I had not once thought of them. They were over the invisible wall, and my only problems were the girl and the dead horses and the living, inimical, out-of-joint highwaymen. Kemp and Pete and I fought in a tiny steel fortress which might as well have been a million miles off the earth, for all we could expect help.

So when Pete suddenly gripped my arm and pointed up and out, and I saw the airplane heading straight for us, I could not believe my eyes. I could not even think for a moment what the flying thing was. On it came, and Kemp saw it too and said sourly. "Well, so much for us."

"Huh!" I said, frowning.

"That's the biggest bomber you ever saw, mister, and it's coming to lay an egg on us. Old Uncle may not know what's keeping his ground troops out of here, but he sure as hell's not gonna let a bunch of

idiots on horses ride all over this ditch lookin' at military secrets forever." He spat. "Relax," he said as Pete jumped to his feet, "you'll never feel it. Though damn it," he added, almost wistfully, "I sure would have liked to see what made them horses tick. No time now. We got maybe thirty seconds."

I did the first, the most important thing that occurred to me. I rolled over once and came beside Barbary and took her in my arms and kissed her as hard as I could.

I was wholly surprised to find her returning my kiss.

I was even more surprised to find in what must have been more than 30 seconds that I was still alive and able to appreciate her lips. I turned and looked up. At that instant the bomber, flying at a height of at least two miles, exploded. We could not hear the sound, but the vivid glare hurt our eyes, and moments later we felt the shock through the earth.

"Good Lord," said Kemp, actually shaken, "it hit the wall!"

They didn't send any more bombers that day.

AFTER a while Pete got out the red book which I'd taken from Barbary, and we pored over it. It was an amazing volume. Down the left side of each page (it was printed on strange, parchment-like

paper, bound in velvet) ran a series of squiggles, a little like Arabic writing, a little like kitten tracks in whitewash, a little like Egyptian hieroglyphs. Down the right side were ranked English words in old-style type. On the first page I read, "jazzy, crib, fambles, eye (or glim), run . . ."

"It's a dictionary," said Pete, quite tremulous with excitement. "Look, the first character's the same for all these hen-prints. *Jazy* used to mean *wig*. It's like a French-English lexicon; only what kind of impossible French is that?"

"Nothing we ever heard of," I said. An idea took me. I snatched the book and thumbed through till I found the word "oil." Then I shoved it under Barbary's nose, pointing to the scribbly characters opposite "oil." "Does that say *zaminfler*?" I asked her.

She read, and for a while she could not speak, and then she stammered, "No, it s-says *jufre*." If I ever laid eye on a girl who was paralyzed with awe, it was Barbary in that moment.

"Then *zaminfler* is gas?"

"Gasses. The s-s-singular is *zimbander*."

"What lingo? What tongue, language —"

"You wouldn't know it if I told ye, cully."

"It's not a language of this

world," said Pete, with no questioning in his voice, but a chill certainty; and the woman said, "You're right, but how ye knew, bowman, flogs me."

"Why shouldn't we know?"

"Why, ye can't have been here long enough yourselves to learn every speech in the planet!"

"What? We were born here."

"Go on!" she said. Well, it wasn't quite that, but an obscene and derisive phrase meaning that. "Did ye or did ye not send a ship through the air at a speed faster than light's and only a matter of days ago? And do ye tell me, cream-face, that *you* were born here on Earth?" Then she sat back, opening her great eyes wide. "Wait, now, this is 1963?" We nodded, fascinated. "Then you might have been born here, o' course. When did your fathers, or ancestors, land? And from where?"

"My ancestors landed in 1693 from England," I said.

Her mobile face expressed seven or eight emotions, and then settled into disbelief. "You sit there in those silly clothes, having passed the speed of light with an airship, having killed my friends with weapons like Earth never saw, and yet ye swear you are of Earth. I'd begun to like you, but I'm plagued if I'll take up with a liar so huge, so black-tongued . . ."

I shook the wench till her head rattled. "See here, Barbary," I said, "there are five of us here and one of you, and before we tell you any more facts you won't believe, suppose you just explain yourself, and your companions, to us."

"Takes five bullies to whip one girl, eh?"

"No, no; majority rules, that's all."

She laughed. The essential good nature of the girl overcame her. "All right, cully. Ask away."

"Where are *you* from?"

"Another world. Another planet. Far away from here, and I won't say where, 'cause you'd send word to *your* planet and they'd attack mine —"

"As we don't have another planet, that's balderdash; besides, why would we attack you?"

"Cly off the poplars of yarrum!" she bawled out, which I took to be an exclamation of amazement, because her jaw dropped and she shook her head. "Ye've just murdered hundreds upon hund—"

"Galloping Jonas started that; he shot Captain Granville. Your precious pals have been holding up stages — I mean busses and trains — all over the West. Several times that tall blond bastard all but shot me in cold blood. Did you expect us to sit quietly on our sand dunes and wait to be cut down one by

one?"

"Why not?" she asked, honestly startled. "It's his business to shoot people; he's a royal scamp, a highway leveller, a rogue o' the King's highway. The highwayman is king of mankind, and can do as he pleases."

"Maybe on your world, but not this one."

"Man, man, do ye not try to lie so outrageously to me, for I know more than you think! There are no highwaymen on my world, but on this, there are thousands, and their business is to kill and rob and carouse. As mine is to please them."

"And do you?" I asked, jealousy gnawing at my brains.

"I haven't begun yet, for there are arguments as to whose doxy I'll be. So I'm yet a dell." I hoped I had that last word figured out right. I hesitated to ask her. She went on: "I don't know where you're from, for so far as we know there's none among all the habitable planets of the universe whose people have sped past light itself, save us. Would ye tell me? To please dear Barbary?" She was directing this outrageous attempt at me. By thunder, if we'd been alone, it would have had me purring.

"Babe," Kemp said suddenly, "you are a total wack, and for two cents I'd shoot you like a snake. But I think you're really from some

damn other place, and lemme tell you in plain words, we live here, we've always lived here, and we always will. Until your boy friends plow us under, I mean."

"There's one without the intellect to lie," said Barbary, doing Kemp an injustice. "Can this be true?"

"Certainly it's true."

"Then why don't ye know that highwaymen are the kings of men? Why do ye dress so oddly and lack horses, and where did ye get these metal carts and how, how, *how* did ye surpass light's speed?"

I took the last query first. "We discovered a metal and a fuel that enabled us to do that this year."

She had me repeat it. Blinking, she asked several questions that, although she was limited to an 18th-Century vocabulary, still were keen and basically scientific in thought. Then she pled with me for a while to think, and being tired of all the idiotic back-and-forth nonsense, I said okay. She sat down in a corner of the hot truck by herself, and gazed at her feet, muttering.

Slowly the sun sank, and vanished, and dusk came on the desert; and still there was no sign of attack from the distant flat where Galloping Jonas camped with his merry men.

WHEN she came to me in the fading light, she was humbled and friendly and worried; almost, I thought, apologetic.

"Cully — what's your name? Sam? — Sam love, you bussed me a bit ago, and 'twas an honest, passionate clip, and I enjoyed it. I must tell you, I like ye better than ever I've liked Jonas. But I feel something terribly wrong, and I even think 'tis not with you, but with us, or mayhap the world we're on." She bit her lips, considering. "Do you answer me this, Sam honey: did I understand you to say that ye've passed the light barrier *for the first time?*"

"That's right."

She wrestled with it as with an incredible conception. "First," she murmured. "First time. God! Can such a thing be?" Her eyes turned their full glorious force on me. "If there is one almighty rule of the universe," she said solemnly, "'tis this . . . What is, was, and will be. There are new things to people, to individuals, but not to nations and worlds. How can there be? Things have always been the same.

"Listen again, Sam. On my world there are no highwaymen, no horses, nothing new, A thing is new to a child, but any adult must know everything in his world and cannot find anything *new*. Unless, mark ye, he goes to another world. On your

planet, there are supposed to be highwaymen, horses, little science and less civilization. Yet here we've come to it, prepared to meet its conditions; prepared from our births to be highwaymen, prime ministers, and doxies, which are the greatest beings of this planet. And here are you, like great men from another planet yourselves, and atop this, you've done something we have always done, and yet *for the first time.*"

I grappled with this hodge-podge and deciphered it slowly. "You came here in space ships." I said slowly. She nodded and said *Aye* quietly. "You were prepared to infiltrate — to merge with us, thinking to rule us, to observe us from vantage places of enormous power and importance." Again she said yes. "Then your people have been here before!"

"Yes, in the 18th Century. They hid and studied, and kidnapped people of England to take home to our world. For nigh three hundred years we prepared — I mean my people, for lud knows I myself am only twenty years old, Earth years — and the ancestors of all our band were chosen and bred to produce offspring who looked exactly like your own folk." I wondered if the usual people on her world were less human than she and Jonas. I dared not ask. "The horses were manu-

factured; God, that took 150 years itself."

"And then you forgot to make them breathe." So the nags were complex and clever machines! Man alive, but *that* explained a lot!

"Aye, I guess they did forget. So anyway when all was ready, we came, and landed, though in America by an error rather than England, and found — you know what we found. We were upset, baffled and —"

"Afraid?" I suggested when she paused.

SHE flashed out at me, "No! We're bred to fear nothing, as is the heritage of the highwaymen!"

"Baby," I said, "when those scouts of yours studied the England of 1725, they took a lot of romantic talk and horse-leavings as gospel truth. The highwaymen were called kings of mankind, but they weren't, they were scum, and only the romantics of the time thought them otherwise. And in addition, this will bowl you over, but there was and is only *one* Prime Minister."

"Now you're lying again!" An angry hand crept toward the diamond pin in her hair. I shook my head, chuckling, and I think she believed me at last. "Someone made awful mistakes then, and when we go home their graves 'll be dug up

and their bones spat on," she said, with a couple of choice cuss words.

"Your people may be wizards at science, but they sure make boners by the basketful," said Pete Ashton, who had been listening silently behind us. "There's one thing I don't get; did you really think that when you came back in 250 years that things would be precisely the same as they were then?"

"O' course we thought so. What is, was, and will be."

"Sam," said Pete, "I get what the young lady's trying to impart. Their race has absolutely no conception of progress. They believe that if you can break the light barrier today, you could have done it last year, or last eon. They must have been stabilized so long ago that beginnings are lost in antiquity. They simply don't comprehend advancement. The status quo was always quo and always will be quo, if I may make a bon mot. Such a state of affairs is admissible to me, but I gather that the opposite isn't true. It isn't possible to their minds that a son can know more and be able to do more than a father."

"True," said Barbary, "he can't. How can it be otherwise?"

"They laughed at Fulton," said Pete absently. "We have some of that same feeling right here on Earth. Thank the powers, we don't

have it to any such ridiculous lengths!"

"D'ye see why I'm all aflutter?" asked Barbary. "D'ye take my confusion? There are things here that cannot be! Where are the horses, and whence came this monstrosity we're sitting in?"

I tried to tell her how it was. I presumed a primitive civilization on her own world; described how they must have found out the secrets of the atom, of science, and then come at last to a place where no advance was made; and after centuries, centuries and tens of centuries, of absolute stand-still, the history was forgotten (perhaps it had never been written at all) and the race came to believe things had always been this way. It was an alien concept to me, but I could grasp it. She could not. It was like a savage trying to understand the Trinity; yet this girl and her people were technically at least a thousand years ahead of me!

She did not understand, but she did come to believe me, for the evidence of Earth's progress was too patent to deny. And she clapped a hand to her mouth at last and gasped, "Ah, the terrible thing we've done, then, murdering and all, when 'tis not your way! When the highwayman is truly *not* the king!"

"Why, your own people don't

murder, then?" asked Pete.

"No! We're civilized. But we learned to do it, we who were born to come here, because it was said 'twas the thing the great ones did. All those deaths for nothing! I must go and explain to Jonas."

But it was too late to explain anything to Galloping Jonas. From the desert came the bark of a pistol, and then a high voice out of the darkness. I had not realized it had grown so black around us. The moon was not quite up, and the land was shrouded and full of dim shapes. The voice cried. "Ye rap-paree buffers in there! Jonas' compliments, and will ye now prepare yourselves, for ye'll be dead within the half hour!"

Barbary screamed out something in a language I could not understand — I presumed it was her native tongue — but her shrill call was deadened and ignored, as half a thousand horses got into motion, and the sands echoed under their flailing hooves.

The last attack had begun.

CHAPTER XIII

THE main body was still a good distance off, and evidently the voice that had called, after the signalling shot, must have been that of an advance scout. We had a minute or two at most, and I

though faster than I'd thought since the day Pete and I were caught in the girls' dorm, back in sophomore days.

"Listen," I said rapidly, "if we can sucker them into the ditch, and get down to the launching platform, the ship's ready for another test flight —"

"Oh, brother!" said Pete. "Let's go."

"But we've got to decoy them into the ditch." I knew that the trucks would explode like shrapnel bombs when the tiny rocket plowed through them, and I remembered that we'd found the oiled paper screen all over an acre of desert. "At least we've got to get them damn close to it," I added.

"I'll sucker them for you," said Kemp in the darkness. "I'll stay here and make 'em think there's forty of us left. Get going."

"Don't be an ass," said Pete. "Do you know what'll happen when the ship comes down this channel at better than 190,000 m. p. s.?"

"I know I won't feel it. And I know I'm sick of listening to all this damn chatter, and you'd better get to running, because I'm gonna spray this truck with Thompson slugs in just twenty seconds. And I ain't kidding, buster," said Kemp.

I thought maybe he'd gone out

of his head with the pain of his shoulder. I would have moved at him, but I somehow knew that he wasn't joking about the submachinegun. I handed Barbary over the north side of the truck, as Pete and the two soldiers jumped to the concrete. Then, as I was climbing over myself, trying to think of something to say, Kemp gave a small hard bark. I realized it was a laugh.

"I wouldn't have done it, mister. But look, I'm all mucked up inside. It ain't only the shoulder, it's my whole chest is shoved in. I ain't got but a couple days to go anyhow, so what the hell?" He choked. I believed he was telling the truth. Risking all our lives, I hung on a minute and said, "You're a good one, Kemp."

"You're a pretty fair boy yourself with that rifle. Hurry up. And kiss the babe for me."

I was running down the black ditch, holding Barbary's arm as we stumbled along, and Kemp's words went round and round in my mind until suddenly the significance of one of them hit me. *Rifle.*

We had left every weapon we had back there in the trucks.

Except of course, for Barbary's diamond bodkin.

WELL, spilt milk, what the hell. If the spaceship

miniature wasn't enough to do the trick, we were just gone geese anyway. I ran as hard as I could, and the wound in my backside opened up again and panged as it had when I'd run down this stretch after Barbary so much earlier that day. The roar of galloping horses — I still could scarcely take in the fact that they were mechanical things; how did they work? — was laced now by the chatter and stammer of Kemp's machinegun. Too great a range, I thought, and realized that he was creating the illusion of a great number of defenders. A rifle spoke then, and a short burst of machinegun fire, and again the rifle.

"For a man with a shattered shoulder," Pete panted, "he's doing magnificently."

"He is a great guy," said one of the soldiers. It was the first time I'd heard him speak. It kind of shocked me. I don't know why. I guess I'd been thinking of our party as Pete and Kemp and Barbary and me. "He'd of made a good sergeant," said the soldier. I thought Kemp could have had no finer epitaph.

We reached the end of the trench, the launching platform loomed square and strangely homey before us. The moon was rising, and objects became less murky. "Get the cover off," said

Pete.

"Oh, God, it's locked."

"Break it." I broke the plastic with my fingernails, turning them back and tearing several in the process. There was the little ship, wee nose aimed down toward the cradle, twenty miles off.

I knew the workings of it. I slaved, feverish, fumbling, and terribly afraid of what I had to do. It wasn't the extraterrestrial invaders, for they'd asked for it; it was Kemp. Nevertheless there was a menace, not only to Pete and me, and our world, but to Barbary, who was a woman and whom I loved. And Kemp had said he couldn't last long.

I couldn't rid myself of the guilt horror, but I worked on, and finally was ready; and still Kemp's gun crashed and stuttered, and pistols barked back over the sand.

Now the horses were silent. Now they had come to the edge of the trench and were pouring in afoot. Now I was ready.

Kemp's gun stopped.

I hoped he was dead. I believe that he was, probably with a merciful bullet in the brain from a great antique horse pistol manufactured on another planet far out in space.

"Get down," I told Pete. He held Barbary below the level of the

great reinforced-concrete-and-steel sheltering screen. The soldiers ducked beside him.

I did what was necessary, and at 190,000 miles a second the tiny missile shot down toward its haven.

There was the most ungodly blast anyone ever heard. To this day I carry a souvenir of that sound, in abnormally sensitive ear drums. It was as though an A-bomb had gone up to two hundred yards from my nose.

No other sound could penetrate that blast and its vast echoes. Lying flat on my face, praying and full of a terror like nothing I'd ever known, I waited; and seconds, or years, later, the whine of flying metal, and the screams of tortured men came through to me.

The trucks had indeed gone up like a charge of TNT. The ship alone would have slain everyone in the ditch, simply by its passing. The barricade of machines accounted for those who were on the desert around it.

When I was sure that no more shards of steel slicing the air, I got up and stared out over the moonlit desert. Nothing moved near the ditch. With a word of caution to Barbary and the others, I walked down toward the place where we had so lately been fighting.

THE carnage was god-awful. There was very little sound now, only a creak as a piece of metal cooled or fell over, or perhaps a sigh as a man expired. I guess I was looking for Kemp, which was stupid, for we'd never find anything identifiable as the corporal.

There were two horses lying together, back from the rim of the ditch a way. I went toward them, because they were the first of the artificial chargers I had seen off their feet. I bent to examine them, saw that hide and hair were torn, exposing dull green metal framework and beyond that, machinery of a complex and recondite appearance.

Torn from the horror I had created, fascinated despite myself by these miracles of craftsmanship, I knelt beside them and began tugging away the hide (synthetic too) and the broken inner frame to get at the works. And for this curiosity I nearly died.

I didn't hear him come at me; I only missed getting the dirk between my shoulders because I leaned sideways to reach for a sprocketed wheel to use as a lever. I didn't even hear the rush of air as his lean blade whistled down. I only knew he was there when a trail of fire slid from the nape of my twisting neck down along my clavicle,

and the arm of the attacker struck me simultaneously on the back.

I hurled myself farther to the side, thus missing a chance to grab his arm; but it was too sudden to give me an instant to think. Turning as I fell, I lashed out with one foot and by luck caught him on the knee, so that he staggered back, cursing, and gave me time to get on my feet. Then, in the split second before he sprang on me, I saw that he was the fat moldy butterball of a rogue, Gothic Beall.

I under-rated him. I poked at his face as he leaped, thinking that a sock in the nose would stop him, he looked so soft and sloppy. Not he! That plump frame hid muscles of whalebone. My wallop glanced off, and his dirk thrust for my chest. Only a perfect cat-spring of a jump saved me from death, as I went backward and just had my shirt touched by the blade.

Off balance, all I could do was flail wildly for his arm and catch it, and try my best to hang onto it, as he followed me back; then, staggering further, my calves hit the broken apparatus that had been a "horse." Down I went, and again pain reminded me fleetingly of Barbary, as my wound crunched on a spring or some other gadget that protruded upward. Good Lord! Even the prospect of death

couldn't keep me from flinching, relaxing my grip on Beall's arm, and clapping my hand to my seat. And Beall, with a whoop of dismal glee, slashed out and got me on the forehead, a long, superficial gash that poured blood into my eyes at once.

I did a backward somersault. Only muscles toned by long work on the flat furrow allowed me to do it without breaking my neck. My whipping heels caught him somewhere, I think on the jaw; for when I had come to my feet beyond the horse, and swiped blood from my eyes with one hand while groping out blindly to ward off blows with the other, I saw him sitting a yard off, shaking his head. I went for him as he bounded upright again.

We closed, and like knife-brawlers of the last century, caught one another's wrists and heaved and panted and struggled, and lashed out at each other with our toes, and tried to trip the enemy, and worked our way around the sands in short, stumbling jerks of motion. And he was the strongest man I had ever tangled with; his short arms bulged with lumpy muscle, cords stood out on his thick neck as he heaved and called me foul names in his synthetic 18th-Century speech.

And slowly, slowly, I bent back his wrist, and slowly brought the dirk round so that, sweating horribly, he saw it come near his own chest; and he dropped it, and so I shifted my grip to his throat, and angrily, savagely yet almost sadly, I killed him with my naked hands.

CHAPTER XIV

“**B**Y Tyburn Tree!” said a loud, guttural voice, as I stood over Beall’s carcass, heaving for breath. I looked, wiping more thin blood from my eyes, and there stood Galloping Jonas, twin pistols trained rigidly on my head. “By the dismal hole of Newgate, cully, but ye did that featly! As good a throttling as ever I clapped peeper to!”

There was a change in the tall ruffian’s voice; I thought, astonished, that the cant words and queer oaths had a decidedly hollow ring to them, as if his heart wasn’t in it. And when he shoved the weapons into his belt, I knew that something was feeding on him so that the heart was out of his masquerade. I said, “You’ve made a mistake, Jonas, you and your friends from the other planet. I’ve talked to Barbary and she understands a little of it. There are no highwaymen here, and you’re not king of men.”

“Aye,” he said slowly, “I grow

’ware of that, there’s all kinds of hell brewing here.”

“There were highwaymen in the old days,” I told him, “but there are none left today.” He regarded me dully, and I knew he didn’t understand it any better than Barbary had at first. So I tried to tell him in a simple way he could grasp. “Your scouts made a mistake back in 1725,” I said. That he could follow, for it was progress, not error, that his race could not conceive “We are far beyond the primitive state you were prepared to meet, Jonas. We can send ships faster than light —”

“Aye!” he said nodding, “I know. Our devices told us that some days ago, which is why we headed this way, to reconnoiter and find what had gone amiss.”

“You’ve been fighting out of sheer bewilderment,” I said and he agreed with a shake of the head. “And because of the nature bred into you, too.”

“Ye know of that?”

“Barbary told me.”

“Is the wench dead?”

“No. She’s safe.”

“I’m glad,” he said. “I love the doxy . . . Well,” he said, more loudly, and a hint of the old ire coming into his voice, “I reckon I should gun ye for what ye did to Beall, and to my poor lads

here." He waited a minute, thinking. "There's no profit in it," he said finally. "Twas our mistake. We'll leave, what's left of us. Go back to your pals. I'll lift the wall and go."

"That wall," I said, "is it a force field?" His strange rudimentary sense of English meanings grappled with that, and he replied, "I think that's close to it; I think it's fairly close; I know it not in your tongue."

"Can you get back to your ships?"

"Easily. And mark me, hick, when we've studied this out, we'll come again, and next time ye shan't know us, but ye'll buckle under to us."

I had my doubts of that, but kept silent; and as if remembering the exit lines of a play he was committed to act through, he shook himself and grinned evilly, and swept off the great black cocked hat and made me a formal bow. "Your servant, sir, and do ye go free with the compliments of Galloping Jonas, who bids ye give thanks to your gods that he is a forgiving and a merciful knight of the road!"

Then he was gone, or so I thought, into the shadows of the desert night; but as I turned, his voice came back to me again.

"Do ye send the girl Barbary

out to us, though, or I'll ride in and carve all your weasands!"

I went back to Pete and Barbary and told them what had happened. Barbary kissed me on the mouth, a hot and promising kiss, and then without a word she had gone too; and I was quite, quite alone with a dreary, penetrating sorrow in my guts, for all the dead men and for the lovely dell in carnation velvet, that was born in another part of the universe.

CHAPTER XV

WE had one more scare next morning, when another bomber came toward our flatland; this time there was no invisible wall to keep it out, and it flew over as the four of us who survived were eating a cold breakfast down by the launching platform. I almost hoped it *would* drop its damn bomb . . . but the crew, seeing that nothing moved below them, evidently used their judgments, and did not let the thing fall. Half an hour later the colonel and every man of his regiment was riding in toward us.

We explained as best we could. If it hadn't been for the evidence of that force field, and the corroboration of all our story by the two GIs, Pete Ashton and I would probably be in some booby hatch

today. However, the colonel believed us, and later, so did the government and the world.

Galloping Jonas and the remnant of his men, with their women and most of their horses, had de-camped in the night, relieving the desert of its encompassing wall. Their future progress Pete and I could trace easily in the papers. I give you a few of the minor headlines which nobody but us (and maybe the wiser heads of government) connected with the extra-terrestrial invasion:

DRESS SHOP BURGLAR-
IZED, 100 NEW OUTFITS
TAKEN . . .

EXCLUSIVE TAILOR CLAIMS
FORTY SUITS STOLEN IN
BROAD DAY

WAVE OF CAR THEFTS HITS
LAS VEGAS . . .

DICTIONARIES MISSING, SAYS
BOOK SHOP . . . and three or four
weeks later,

NO TRACE OF DOZEN MISS-
ING PERSONS IN FLAGSTAFF;
EVIDENCE OF FOUL PLAY
LACKING

Pete put down the paper after he'd read the last item aloud. "They're on their way to outer space, I suppose," he said. "Just as some poor baffled devils out of Gin Lane and Rotten Row found themselves in 1725. Jonas and his boys, after walking around and observing sup-

erficially for a while in their stolen suits, and picking up some autos and God knows what else for study and duplication, have taken off for home." He laughed. "In one or two hundred years, we'll have another brief abortive invasion. They'll figure out who's the 'king of mankind' on Earth, and they'll come back as movie stars, and big-league pitchers, and bald-headed golfers. They'll come roaring down the highways in 1963 autos, and our descendants will gape out of their private planes and wonder what on earth's happened, just like we did last month when the highwaymen came. And after some fiasco which I can only remotely imagine, the lads 'll go home again, freshly bewildered and still not understanding progress, and prepare to return as — I don't know what."

"Why did they come at all?"
I wondered aloud.

"Power? I don't know."

"Maybe it was boredom. The ghastly boredom of a whole planet for which there's nothing ever new unless they find it on another world."

"I guess that's as close a guess as any." He lit a pipe. "What a curious, slapdash pack they are. Find this planet in a million, but can't set down in England, where they were headed. Spend cen-

turies manufacturing horses, and forget to make 'em breathe. Train people from childhood to be invaders, but they have to carry lexicons with them because they can't always remember the words."

"When they come next time, with their automobiles and their modern slang and the clothes that'll be out-dated ten years from now, I'll bet a cooky they'll land in China or Tibet," I said.

"Sure. They'll never catch up. They'll never blend with humanity and rule us in secret, they'll always stand out like great big six-foot sore thumbs."

"What if they'd brought their own weapons with them this time?" I said, thinking of that for the first time. "We wouldn't have stood a chance against them. It was only their flintlocks and black powder that let us whip 'em."

"I doubt if they have weapons. I doubt if they make war. Barbary said they didn't kill people at home. It must be a very simplified culture they have, to let the status quo persist for centuries. And when they obviously believe that a couple of weeks study of a country will allow them to learn everything about it, then it's plain their own civilization is essentially most fearfully simple indeed. They took any Earthman's word for fact, back in 1725, or they wouldn't have had — well, seven-

teen prime ministers, for instance."

"I wonder how they found Earth in the first place?" I mused. "They must be out all the time, crews of them exploring the galaxies. They implied that they were infiltrating other planets, too. Likely planets where the civilization's so backward that it hasn't changed either in centuries. Why, there must be humans, or humanoid forms, all over space!"

"I always figured there were," said Pete. "I always did read them science-fiction magazines religiously."

I went out afterwards to look at the launching platform, where our little ship was set for its next test flight. Then in the evening I went for a lonely walk on the desert, as I did every day . . . mostly to think of Barbary. This sundown found me in the low foothills, and when I rounded a valley's end and saw the girl astride the horse, I thought for a minute that my imagination was working overtime.

It was Barbary, though; in a stylish frock, immodestly tucked up to let her sit the saddle. We stared at one another for a time, not speaking and at last she said hesitantly, "Well, cully, are ye glad to see me or no?"

I didn't tell her. I dragged her off that damn horse and proved it to her.

GALLOPING Jonas is long gone from our world. The second wave of invaders, scheduled for a year after the first, did not materialize, for Jonas went home and stopped them. Barbary and I expect that our grandchildren, perhaps, or our great-great-grandchildren, will be dealing with her home's next expedition.

Jonas had raised a fuss about Barbary staying, but my wife is a strong-willed girl, as I well know. I have twinges where I sit down, every time it rains . . . and she still wears that diamond-headed hairpin, though today in a more modern coiffure.

She retains both her inborn nature, which is remarkably simple and good, and her acquired habits of 18th-Century thought, which are wild, unpredictable, and fantastic.

Everyone wonders how I can keep a stable of four splendid horses on my salary. They never notice that the horses do not breathe, that there's never any feed in the stalls. They were my wife's dowry, from

Galloping Jonas. She taught me to control them — it's done mentally — and the artificial beasts are a joy to us when we take them out in the mists of early morning and tear over the desert at fifty and sixty miles an hour.

Above our fireplace is a plaque, set with half a hundred old English gold coins. Barbary had them in her purse when she came back to me; I suspect she lifted them from Jonas. Numismatists have offered us a fortune for them, because of their mint condition. We can't sell, naturally. They're counterfeit, perfect but false, stamped out on a press in a world that lies halfway across the void.

Occasionally my wife points out to me the distant star around which her home planet revolves. The fact that it is invariably a different star, well, this is only delightful proof that my girl is the child of her slapdash race, the pseudo-highwaymen, the people without progress; the cosmic bunglers.

. THE END

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★ Computers Are Idiots! ★

WITH all the excitement engendered by the successful application of computing machines, so-called "mechanical brains" the publicists have failed to paint an accurate picture of the gadgetry.

Computing machines are idiots!

Mazes of circuitry, complexes of vacuum tubes, transistors and resistors, panoramas of cathode ray tubes, computers still do only the most rudimentary sort of calculating. Add, they are instructed, subtract, multiply by repeated addition. The machines do that— but no more. True they operate at a

fantastic rate and they are great relievers of drudgery, but one intuitive flash in the human brain is more significant than all the computing mechanisms devised.

Viewed in their proper perspective, computers are clever and ingenious mechanisms capable of relieving the world of a great deal of tiresome, repetitive, laborious work. But to say that they "think" in any sense analagous to the human mind is preposterous except for the "yes-no" of one human brain cell. And the mind has billions!



"Well, we're here!"

Practical Joke

by

Richard O. Lewis

Hypnotapes were a proven boon to industry, where difficult problems could be experienced and solved vicariously. But to marriage—sheer chaos!

MARTHA Dylon came cautiously out of her front door. She paused a moment, looked up and down the street, twice, then hurried furtively down the steps to the shaded sidewalk and turned right.

She had it in the bottom of her market basket. It was under two layers of old newspaper and a dish of fudge, all of which was covered carefully with a checkered cloth.

Her oval face was flushed a warm pink and her blue eyes, at other times innocence personified were shiftily with caution and guilt. So much so that a casual passer-by would have suspected her instantly of smuggling dope, carrying secrets to the enemy, or—at least—of having her husband's head in the basket.

Half way up the next block she

turned hurriedly into a short walkway that led to a small house, plastisprayed to resemble quarried marble. She glanced quickly back over her shoulder as she mounted the porch, then rapped swiftly upon the paneled door. It opened almost instantly, and she entered.

In the richly appointed living-room, Mrs. Dylon sank down upon the divan. "I—I brought it," she said, breathlessly. "The—the one I was telling you about yesterday."

She took a dainty handkerchief from the pocket of her print dress, dabbed lightly at the mist of perspiration on her flushed face, and emitted a nervous little laugh.

Alice Joiner was a tall willowy woman with hair of a rich brown that fell to her shoulders in heavy waves. Her wide mouth had smile crinkles at its corners and her



hazel eyes held dancing lights that suggested little imps at play.

She sat down in a formized chair, crossed long legs, activated a cigarette, and grinned. "I hope it's as good as you say it is!"

Martha nodded quickly. "It is!" She glanced around the room, leaned forward, lowered her voice. "It's better than *Bashful Boy!* Better even than—than *Garden of Eden!*"

Alice whistled a low note of appreciation, then wrinkled her nose. "But I never did think much of *Garden of Eden*. The—ah—scenery seemed a bit stilted."

Martha Dylan pouted her small mouth, put her head to one side and shrugged. "Well, y-yes . . . But it *does* have a certain amount of historical value!"

Alice Joiner nodded behind a thin column of smoke. "But the studies in psychology interest me more. Like *Island Marooned*, for instance."

Martha's blue eyes went round. "Oh, you still have *that* one? I had almost forgotten it. Would—would you mind . . . ?"

"Not at all."

Alice uncrossed her long legs, went to a small desk, and opened the lower drawer. She fumbled about among a clutter of small tape rolls, read various labels, then selected one. "Here it is."

The flush on Martha's face gave

way to sudden pallor. "You—you don't keep them right there in—in the desk drawer!" she said, incredulously.

Alice came back to her chair, smiling. "Why not? It's the safest place. If I tried to hide them, Fred might stumble on to them some day. But in the desk drawer with his old tapes, the obsolete ones, they're as safe as can be."

"But what if he should happen to find them and *run one?*" persisted Martha.

Alice chuckled at the thought. "I can just see him! He'd blow his gyro higher than the roof!"

She leaned forward and held out the tape. "But there is really no danger. Look at the title. *The Moon*, 1958. No one is interested in what people thought the moon was like back in 1958, now that a landing has been made and the real facts known. So I just steam a label from one of Fred's old tapes, paste it on mine, and throw the old tape away."

Martha had to admit that it was a rather clever idea. Better than hiding them in the bottom of a box of old undies. Momentary terror gripped her. If Bill should ever happen to go rooting around in that old box . . . She shook away the thought as being one too hideous even for speculation.

Taking the tape Alice proffered

her, she then got her own tape from the basket, along with the fudge. She hesitated, tape in hand, eyes troubled. "Do you—do you really think we should be doing things like—like this, Alice? Sometimes I think it's—it's—well, not quite fair . . ."

Alice blew smoke into the air and laughed musically. "Fair!" she said. "Fair! Since when has there ever been fairness between the sexes!" She leaned forward abruptly. "Listen, Martha, any thing the female does is fair. Remember that. Anyway, Fred and Bill are probably so far ahead of us in unfairness that we'll never catch up, no matter what!"

"But there are times when I feel . . ."

"Snap out of it! Now, what's the title of this new one?"

Martha shot sidelong glances about the room again, blushed a deep crimson, then leaned forward and whispered the title into Alice's eager ear.

Alice's arched brows shot up a fraction of an inch further. "O-oo, la la!" she said. "I think I'll run it off this very afternoon. Should be a terrific study in basic instincts!"

FRED Joiner sat in his office staring across his desk at the blank wall. The lines in his long, rugged face were deeply drawn

and his gray eyes were lost in thought. Work had piled up on the desk before him, had been piling up for days. But he couldn't get started at it. He felt in no mood for work, couldn't concentrate on it.

Visions of the tall, brown-haired, tantalizing Alice, his wife, kept drifting disturbingly about in his brain. He saw her in the *plasta* sunsuit she had worn at the beach last week-end, her long legs brown and warm in the sun. He saw her in the black, clinging nightdress she sometimes wore. The one with the open lace-work at the mid-riff. He caught a disquieting but stimulating view of her in the diaphanous aqua pajamas he had purchased for her three long weeks ago. Visions of the honeymoon of six years ago flashed kaleidoscopically, lingered maddeningly.

"What in hell has gotten into her?" he asked himself, for the tenth time that morning.

Was it something he had done? No, he couldn't think of anything. No, she wasn't really angry with him. It was just a certain passive frigidity . . .

Was it something he *hadn't* done? Such as failing to remember her birthday, their wedding anniversary, Peace Day, Wife's Day, Mother's Day, Sweetheart's Day, My Best Friend's Day, Pal's Day? No, he had remembered

each with an appropriate gift.

Then what the hell . . . ?

Maybe she was just fed up. Maybe she needed a vacation. He remembered the hypnotape, *Family Relations*. It had strongly recommended periodic vacations between husband and wife to perpetuate marital harmony. Perhaps that was it. Perhaps he should send her to her sister's for a couple of weeks.

But, better still—since he wasn't getting any work done, anyway—maybe *he* should take a vacation. He could fly over to Chitown for a week or ten days . . .

There was a girl in Chitown, a brunette he had once known . . .

Hell! Even if he flew over and stayed just a night or two . . .

He was still savoring the idea ten minutes later, toying with it, when the door opened and Bill Dylon stepped into the room.

It seemed to Fred that Bill hadn't been looking very well lately. During the past several weeks, the fellow's chest had slowly become deflated, his shoulders had grown slightly stooped, a hang-dog look had spread over his moon-like face, and his inquisitive blue eyes had begun more and more to search for something they seemed unable to find.

Fred summoned up what he hoped was an encouraging smile. "Come in, Bill," he said. "Come

in. Sit yourself down." Even though Bill was a bit blunt at times and a little slow on the uptake, Fred liked the fellow. He was companionable and a good man with whom to share work.

Bill slumped into a chair, placed a handful of radigrams on Fred's desk, smiled wanly, and puffed a cigarette into activity.

Fred went through the grams hurriedly, then let them flutter back to the desk. "All rush stuff," he sighed. "And I'm so far behind now that I'll never get caught up!"

"You too?"

Fred nodded. "Can't seem to get my mind on it," he confessed.

Bill eyed him inquisitively for several silent seconds, then let out breath in a long sigh. "Same here." He mashed his cigarette on the edge of the dispenser. "It — it's Martha," he said, bluntly.

"Yeah?"

"I don't know what's come over her," Bill said, shaking his head.

"Cold? Listless? Not really angry with you, just indifferent? Doesn't seem to care whether you are around or not?"

Bill looked up quickly. "How did you know?"

"Because," said Fred Joiner, "it's the same kind of treatment I've been getting from Alice for the past few months!"

Both men sat in dejected silence for a long while, each busy with

his own thoughts.

"You don't suppose it's them damn telvis commercials they watch and listen to all day, do you?" Bill asked, finally. "You know, the ones where the husband is always coming home from work all bright and gay with a new 'copter or a shiny red autocar and a dozen roses to show his appreciation for the little woman? We must look a bit drab and beat-up after they watch stuff like that all day."

FRED gave the idea a moment of careful attention, then shook his head. "Could be, but I doubt it. I believe it is something that has happened within the last two or three months."

"Other—other men—?" It was scarcely a whisper.

Fred's lips tensed to whiteness, then relaxed. "N-no," he said slowly. "They'd hardly da . . ."

"But they've been going out together quite a bit nights," insisted Bill. "They're going out again tonight, too. Remember? They've been talking about that old play they wanted to see. You know, where they have real live actors on the stage. It's called *West Lynn*, or something like that."

"Maybe it just proves that they want to get away from us, that they're fed up with us. I was toying with an idea just before you came in, thinking of how a hus-

band and wife sometimes need a vacation from each other." He leaned across the desk, lowered his voice. "I was thinking that maybe I would fly over to Chitown for a few days. Maybe—maybe you'd like to come along and . . ." He let the idea dangle.

A tiny speck of light appeared in Bill's eyes, grew rapidly brighter. He took in a deep breath. "Y-yeah," he said, speculatively. "Y-yeah. I—I used to know a blonde in Chitown."

Then the light flickered out and his face sagged again. He shook his head. "We can't do it, Fred." He gestured toward the radigrams on the desk. "Not with all this work piled up, all rush stuff. We just can't walk off and leave it, you know."

There was brooding silence again, and Fred felt that Bill had let him down, had let him down again into the black depths from which there was no way out.

Both men were cogs in the great machine known throughout the world as the Universal Research and Service Association. URSA was, in reality, a great brain where all the known facts of the world were housed or were in the process of rapidly being housed. Here, cybernetic machines clicked and hummed incessantly over problems in mathematics, physics, astronomy, and kindred sciences. Here

were hundreds of thousands of hypnotapes covering every conceivable subject. Here were trained minds which coordinated, compiled, dispensed information to every part of the world.

A chemist, stumped by a formula that should function but didn't, stated his problem to URSA. URSA analyzed it, dispatched hypnotapes immediately on various pertinent phases of biology, catalytic agents, physics, or any other subject that might throw light upon the problem. By using the hypnotapes, the chemist could actually experience in a few scant hours myriad facts of experimentation that would otherwise require half a life time to assimilate.

A man wished to become a specialist in servicing certain types of electronic machines had but to state his desires to URSA, and URSA would immediately dispatch to him "experience" hypnotapes.

It sometimes took a long time to make these kinds of "experience" tapes. A 3D camera was focused upon the machine to be studied and upon a pair of disembodied hands. While the hands broke down, inspected, and reassembled the machine a voice explained the process and named the parts and their function. Then the tape was speeded up a hundredfold, almost to the speed of thought itself, and was ready for the user.

The user, under the hypnotic effect of the tape, associated himself with the disembodied hands and, in this manner, actually experienced the involved process in a few short minutes.

The hypnotapes left an indelible impression on the user, one not easily erased.

Fred and Bill were Selectors—specialists in their fields. Each had been subjected to hypnotapes containing the names, numbers, and subjects covered by all the other hypnotapes in the URSA files. When questions came their way, they merely reached back into their own store of memories and selected tapes on file which would give the logical answers. Sometimes the questions were simple and required only a moment's concentration. At other times they might become involved in such a manner as to require hours of research. They could do this by flashing the tapes on a small screen for quick scanning.

Each worked independently of the other for the most part, but they sometimes found short cuts by pooling their memory banks. But now the work had been piling up for both of them and between them.

Fred picked up the radigrams again and thumbed through them thoughtfully.

"I'll tell you what we'll do," he

said, seriously. "There's no use moping around. We'll get this work done. We'll lose ourselves in it. We'll work morning, noon, and night. We'll get caught up and then maybe we'll feel better. And—and maybe things will take a turn for the better. If not—" He looked levelly across the desk at Bill. "If not, we'll damn well take ourselves a little vacation!"

He was gratified by the look of determination that flashed into Bill's eyes as the man got up quickly from his chair and extended a hand.

"Right!"

TWO minutes after Alice Joiner, and Martha Dylon had left Fred's house for the play that night, Fred was pouring Bill and himself a couple of stiff ones. They saluted each other gravely, poured another round, then set grimly to work.

As sometimes happens, a quantity of work, when viewed in its entirety, seems formidable, but when attacked piece by piece, melts away with startling rapidity. The work that had that morning, seemed mountainous had by the end of a vigorous afternoon been reduced to a mole hill. And now, after another strenuous hour, it had dwindled to the point where Fred had but one remaining listing of hypnotapes before him and

Bill was confronted with a last problem.

"Corn smut," Bill said, pouring himself another drink.

Fred looked up from his listing. "Corn smut?"

Bill sipped his drink. "In the Midwest."

"But I thought we had corn smut licked years ago!"

"Seems to be a new variety. No one knows much about it. None of the tapes in our files seems to have any bearing on it. Hm-m-m." He tossed the paper to the desk, finished his drink, stretched, and poured himself another. "Think I'll let it go till tomorrow at the office."

Corn smut? Corn smut? The thing kept running around in Fred's brain. He wished Bill hadn't mentioned it. Now he wouldn't be able to rest until he found a logical answer.

He tried to refocus his attention upon the unfinished listing. But the thought persisted. Corn smut? Something began stirring in the back of his brain, something deep down in his memory bank.

Suddenly, he sat up straighter in his chair. "Wait a minute. I believe I've got it!"

He opened the bottom drawer of the desk, began rummaging around among the old tapes. "Had something here about corn . . . Let's see . . . Haven't looked at

these for years . . . Yeah, here it is! *Corn Smut, India, 1960.*"

He held up the tape. "It's an old one. Obsolete. Not on file any more. And, for that very reason, it may contain an answer." He tossed it to Bill. "There's a hypnovis in the library. You can go in and give it a try. I'll finish up here while you're at it."

Bill finished the drink before retiring to the library.

Now that his brain was clear again, it didn't take Fred long to finish with the listing. He added the last paper to the neat pile upon the desk, rubbed his forehead between thumb and finger, looked at his empty glass, then filled it.

He puffed a cigarette into life, leaned back in his chair, and was just raising the glass to his lips when the library door swung open and Bill staggered into the room. His face was pale, moist with perspiration. His body was trembling from head to foot, and his mouth was opening and closing soundlessly over chattering teeth.

Fred leaped to his feet.

Bill's face went suddenly angry red, all except the lips which were drawn back tightly over the quaking teeth. His eyes blazed, and he held out a warning hand. "D-don't come near me!" he chattered. "Fred Joiner, if — if this is your idea of a joke, I'll—I'll kill you. S'elp me God!" He hurled

the tape at Fred's head and reeled forward, off balance.

FRED caught the tape in one hand, caught Bill by the shoulder with the other, and led the stricken man to the divan. Bill slumped down, his head hanging forward loosely, his arms dangling lifelessly between his knees.

"Now what's this all about? What happened to you?"

"It—it was awful!" Bill stuttered. "It—it was gawd-awful!"

Fred sloshed liquor into a glass and helped his friend raise it to trembling lips.

"What was awful? What are you talking about?"

Bill gulped the liquor and let the empty glass fall to the floor. "I—I was walking down the street," he panted. "It—it was moonlight. A beautiful night. Warm. Trees were blooming. There were flowers . . ."

Bill's eyes stared straight ahead as if he were still under the hypnotic influence of the tape. "I was all alone. Just walking along. Then—then three ruffians leaped out from somewhere and grabbed me. They—they dragged me behind some rose bushes and— and . . ." His voice broke.

"Yes?"

"They—turned out to be nice looking chaps. Big, handsome fellows. And I was—I was a—" His

throat constricted his voice to a croaking sound. "*—a female!*"

"What in hell are you talking about!" Fred exploded. "You're drunk!"

Bill let out a tremulous sigh. "Not drunk." He shuddered "Just ravished. The title, you know, was not *Corn Smut.*"

"No?"

"No." Bill shook his head slowly from side to side. "The title was *Rape in a Rose Garden!*"

"*Rape . . . ?*"

"RAPE!"

"But I don't have any tapes like that!" Fred sat down heavily upon the divan, his fingers toying with the tape. This wasn't making any sense at all. Bill had lost his mind, or was drunk, or . . .

Suddenly, under the pressure of his thumb, the freshly pasted title on the tape loosened. He looked at it, his brow furrowing deeply. "I don't get it!" he said.

"I did," Bill wheezed.

"I mean, this tape has been tampered with. It's a new tape, but an old title has been pasted on." The furrows went deeper. "I wonder . . ."

He got up quickly from the divan, went to the desk, and took a handful of tapes from the lower drawer.

"Yeah!" he breathed, after a hurried inspection. "Several of them! Old titles pasted on new

tapes! And there is only one person in this house . . ." The rest of the sentence was lost as he hurried into the library.

Fred Joiner returned seconds later, his lean jaw set in hard lines. He focused the lens of the hypnovis to a tiny screen for scanning, selected one of the tapes, and adjusted it in the machine. A moment later a title flashed upon the screen.

Garden of Eden.

A scene irised in. It was a lush jungle of flowers. Birds sang. A path became visible among the low bushes. The scene along the path became a swift panorama.

Fred knew that if he were under the hypnotic effect, he would be actually having the experience of strolling leisurely along that path through a paradise of wondrous beauty.

The path led to a small glade. There was a waterfall. The scene centered upon a flower-bordered pool. Something stirred among the bushes and flowers beside the pool. A man's head appeared. Then his shoulders and torso. The upper part of his body was naked, the lower part still screened by the flora.

Adam, Fred guessed. But what an Adam! Every line of his body was desirable. Every action was a poetry of motion. Even the modern haircut and the small scar

of an appendectomy detracted little from the wild perfection.

The scene became a still, as if the stroller had paused. The man exposed strong dentures and a part of a gold tooth in a coy smile, then began advancing from the bushes . . .

"Shut the damn thing off!" screamed Bill. "I can't stand another . . ."

"Hold it, Bill! I've got to find out something!"

Fred found out in the next scene, and it left him drenched in a cold sweat. "I'll be damned!" he said as the screen went blank.

Rapidly, one after another, he ran off other tapes. *Bashful Boy*, *Shore Leave*. *The Beast*. *Tea for Three*. *The Last Woman*.

"I'll be damned!" he said again, through clinched teeth. "Alice! Alice! So that's it!"

Bill looked up wanly from the divan. "You — you mean . . ."

"Every afternoon while I slave at the office!"

Bill whistled a low note of deep sympathy. "If I had a wife like that," he began, "I'd—I'd . . ."

His mouth fell suddenly open. His face went a shade paler. He stared thoughtfully at nothing for a long minute. Then he got up slowly from the divan, took a faltering breath, and started toward the door.

"Look in the places where you think they are least likely to be," Fred advised him as he went out.

BILL was back in less than a half hour, his face haggard, a half dozen tapes in his hands. He tossed them to the divan, turned to the little server, and emptied the bottle into his glass. "In the bottom of a box of old undies," he said. "No use running them through. I — I couldn't stand it!"

Fred got a fresh bottle from the cabinet and poured into his glass.

Bill was pacing the floor. "I'll — I'll wait up for her tonight!" he shouted suddenly, his eyes blazing. "I'll—I'll get a divorce! I'll — I'll go 'way!! I'll — I'll burn every damn one of those damn lousy . . ." His voice became so entangled in expletives that it served little other purpose than that of an escape valve.

Fred felt his own anger running high, higher than at any other time he could remember. Even glass after glass of liquor did little to lessen it. He felt betrayed. Sold out!

Once, he found himself helping Bill pace the floor, aiding him with a few expletives that had hitherto been overlooked.

"We'll go to the moon!" Bill roared. "We'll — we'll be termites!"

"Hermites!" Fred corrected, without finding any appeal in the idea. He wanted to strike out, to fight back, to retaliate in some manner. Liquor splashed from his glass to the rug as he finally slumped down wearily into a chair.

"We'll beat hell out of 'em!" Bill was yelling, over and over again, pausing only long enough to refill his glass between pronouncements. "We'll beat hell out of 'em!"

Fred found himself sinking slowly down into a chill blackness that slowly dampened his anger. Suddenly, he found that what he wanted most of all was — well, just Alice. His own little Alice. Tears came to his eyes. He began feeling frightfully sorry for himself.

"We can't tolerate a thing like this!" Bill decided. "We've got to put a stop to it!"

Alice. His own dear sweet little Alice.

"That's what happens when women don't have enough to do around the house to keep them busy," reasoned Bill. "In the old days, they had to cook dinner, wash the dishes!"

Alice . . .

"Hell!" said Fred. "I must be getting drunk!"

He got up, refilled his glass, and sat down again. "Times have changed," he reminded. "People

seek thrills. Maybe this is — is just a passing fancy," he suggested.

"Fancy!" Bill bellowed. "Fancy! I'll say it's *fancy*! Did you notice that sailor in *Shore Leave*? Lace, even!"

Visions of *Shore Leave* flashed through Fred's brain. He remembered that the tape had been slightly torn at one point . . .

Torn?

Fred's brain did a nose dive. It went blank. Then, deep in the blankness, something began to slowly stir.

"We'll lock them out!" Bill was screaming. "We'll make 'em sleep in the street! We'll . . ."

"Shut up," said Fred. "Sit down. Be quiet a minute. I'm trying to think." A smile had begun to spread over his lips. The smile widened into an evil grin. Then he threw his head back and laughed long and satanically.

Bill stopped his pacing. "You gone nuts or something?"

Fred doubled up in the chair and bellowed loudly. Tears flowed from his eyes. "Sit down, Bill," he said, wiping his eyes with the back of a shaking hand. "Sit down and listen."

Bill sat down slowly on the divan and stared.

"How would you like to have Martha just the way she used to be? How would you like to have

her waiting for you when you come home from work? Wanting you?"

"Huh?" said Bill.

Fred laughed again. "How would you like to have Martha throw away her tapes on her own accord? Admit she was licked? Come to you with open arms?"

"Yeah?"

"What would happen if, say tomorrow afternoon, the girls put on their tapes and were brought expectantly to the — er — you know, and then, just before the — er — crucial moment was reached, the tape would suddenly end? All of them like that?"

"You mean . . .?"

Fred leaned forward, his face diabolical. *"What do you think of the idea of taking a pair of scissors and snipping off the ending of each tape just a split second before —er—you know, and then putting the tapes back where we found them?"*

Bill stared long and levelly at his friend, one eyebrow twitching slightly. "I think that would be one of the lowest, meanest, dirtiest, most contemptible tricks ever played on a fellow creature," he said, finally. "Where in hell's the scissors?"

THE END



Transistor Miracle



BY now everyone knows about the transistor—and expect it to be hammered at you again and again. While it's in its infancy now, it is going to change the way of living of every human being, directly and indirectly! What is a transistor that it has such a profound influence on our times—and the future?

A transistor is merely a small piece of moderately rare metal called Germanium, about the size of a matchhead, to which are attached three or four wires. Certainly it is not an impressive sight. Its magic lies in the fact that it will do everything a vacuum tube—

a hundred times its size—will do, and do it better!

The radio built in a wrist watch, the TV set built in a shoebox—these are spectacular, but not really important aspects of the gadget which is more than a gadget. The fact is that the transistor will make possible applications of electronics to almost anything. This is due to its simplicity, compactness and (eventually) its cheapness.

People are aware that most of the miracles of tomorrow will come from electronics and its applications—perhaps even more so than atomic energy. Imagine wedding these two great fields! The

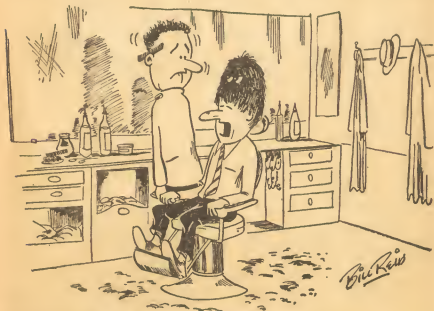
results are fantastic. It is a certainty that almost all work will be mechanized to a greater extent—the direct result of the transistor—and this includes a lot of so-called “brainwork”. Tomorrow we will have leisure and luxury undreamed of. That four-hour working day is coming!

The transistor whose application in computing machines and general electronic substitutes for brains and muscles, behaves precisely like an electronic vacuum tube. It has an effective grid and plate. But it gives off almost no filamentary heat. It can be modified to behave like a photo-electric cell. And it can be substituted in most famil-

iar electronic circuits.

It is hard to exaggerate the importance of this device. But then, once upon a time, the radio tube was unfamiliar too. Today every child appreciates its magic. So with the transistor. In the space of three short years since its practical invention, the transistor has become of commercial importance. Today it is possible to buy and experiment with them, and amateur scientists will discover new uses for them.

Tomorrow it will not be possible to buy a single piece of electronic equipment without discovering somewhere in the “innards” the ubiquitous transistor.



“Just a little off the top.”



Code Of The Bluster World

by

Milton Lesser

Establishing friendly relations with a new planet was usually routine work. But on Qadak it was impossible — unless you were prepared to die!

FROM the moment the government cruiser *Milky Way* shuddered into the invisibility of sub-space, I began to expect trouble.

"Ned, you're a regular worrywart," Ambassador Hurley said.

Ned, that's me. Ned Talbert's the name and don't get me wrong. I'm no diplomat, no foreign service career man. I'm an explorer and it's got so I'm not happy unless there are more parsecs between me and civilization than



there are square light years in a globular cluster. It was just my luck to know more about Qadak III than any other terran.

"I'm sorry, sir," I told Ambassador Hurley as two taciturn members of what passed for the Qadakian diplomatic corps drove us in what was nothing more than an ornate wagon toward the new Terran Embassy. "I just don't think the Qadakians are ready for diplomatic relations. They don't understand what it implies."

"Really, Ned," Robin Hurley said. Robin was the Ambassador's daughter, and on the long sub-space trip out from Ophiuchus, where the closest Terran colony lies, Robin and I had become good friends. When I thought about it, Robin almost made shackling an explorer to a diplomatic mission—to the first diplomatic mission ever accepted by the Qadakians—worthwhile. "Just because the Qadakians are a stage or two below us in culture—"

"A stage or two," I said as our wagon climbed a series of terraced hills pulled by two sure-footed bipedal beasts of burden which looked enough like enormous submen to make the Qadakian believe *we* were a stage or two below *them* in biological development, "A stage or two is nothing. They're barely civilized at all. I don't think the government ship

should have stranded us here until we were sure the Qadakians understood exactly what a diplomatic mission was."

"Some optimist you are," Robin said.

Qadak III was not a place for optimism, but I didn't tell her that. It was a small rugged planet of a binary star system. The sky was as pale blue, as watery-translucent, as a Martian sky. Neither the small red sun nor the slightly larger white sun gave as much heat as Sol gave Mars. Together, they put Qadak in an energy range midway between Earth and Mars—which meant that as the wagon took us toward our Embassy, Ambassador Hurley, Robin and I were bundled to the ears in warm clothing. The Ambassador and I wore shapeless parkas and hoods but Robin wouldn't hear of such a thing. She wore a ski outfit which might have been fine on one of the Himalayan package tours, but here on Qadak her teeth were already chattering and the tip of her pert nose looked blue.

"You should have dressed more warmly," Ambassador Hurley told her. "Can't have the official hostess of the Terran Embassy down with a case of frostbite."

AMBASSADOR Hurley's banter hid serious concern. The Ambassador doted on his daugh-

ter and Robin knew it and the knowledge usually made her behave like a petty tyrant toward her father but what could you expect of a pretty and spoiled twenty year old?

The struggling bipeds bore our wagon higher into the craggy hills of Qadak, where the clear air was numbingly cold. Snow clung to the rocky floor of the deepest ravines but Qadak was a dry world and the mountains were lifeless and bare. Far below us, the sparse timberline was only faintly—reluctantly on Qadak, I thought, if you can call a timberline reluctant—green.

There were three Qadakians in the wagon with us, and just looking at them could give you the willies. But I was an explorer and Robin was an idealist, so if anybody got the willies it was the Ambassador himself, but Robert Hurley could mask his feelings pretty well. The Qadakians look like rubber - skinned dinosaurs, man-sized with huge heads and fantastically large jaws and teeth that could bite your arm off and a tail one swipe from which could knock over a three-ton jetmobile, let alone the flimsy wagon which was our official vehicle of state. The Qadakians had newly adapted our custom of wearing clothing although their rubber-like skins were perfect insulators against the

cold of their world and they only wore the clothing as a gesture of friendship, but it was hard to see what view of what part of a dinosaur's antamoy would shock even the primmest of Terran girls. And Robin Hurley, make no mistakes, was far from prim.

The wagon finally hit a stretch of level ground. The Ambassador beat his parka-clad arms across his chest. The cold had made his nose run and there were particles of ice in his moustache. His face looked a scrubbed schoolboy pink in the clear freezing air.

"I—I th-think we a-arrived," Robin chattered, her jaw numb with cold.

I grinned at the Ambassador, but he gave his daughter a stern fatherly look. She winked at him and skipped from the wagon as it rolled to a stop at the entrance to a large cave. Her ski-suit was the color of flame and it would have looked fine in a cheerful skiing lodge in the Himalayas especially since color-crazy Bhutan has been going after the tourist trade, but on stark, bare, colorless Qadak it stuck out like the proverbial sore thumb.

The Qadakian wagoneers clucked something in their native tongue and led all of us into the cave.

"Hey, I remember this place," I said. "It's what passes for a palace around here. They haven't

taken us to the Embassy, sir. They've taken us to the palace probably to impress us with a show of strength."

"Shall I act impressed or indifferent? You know the Qadakians, Ned. That's why you're here."

"Act indifferent. Act indifferent as hell. They're megalomaniacs, pompously and fantastically convinced of their own importance. It you don't try to deflate them from the very start you'll be the yes-maningest Ambassador in the history of galactic relations."

The Ambassador nodded. Robin had already ducked inside the cave. I began to trot because I didn't want to lose sight of her for long. Trotting on Qadak is something to see. The planet is midway in size between Mars and Mercury and a fairly athletic man will get the hang of the gravity differential almost at once with the result that he can jump around better than any kangaroo that ever came out of Australia.

It was unexpectedly warm inside the cave. On my third jump I alighted next to Robin, who had already stripped off her ski-suit. Under it she wore a dark blue flannel shirt and tight levis. The shirt was open at the throat and against the dark blue of the

shirt and framed by her gleaming black hair, Robin's face and throat were very white and very lovely.

"It almost looks like something out of a medieval romance," she told me.

She had a point there. Torches thrust into niches in the cave wall lit the huge cavern with an eerie, pulsing crimson light. Hundreds of Qadakians were assembled near us in two long torch-bearing rows, awaiting their *numin* or king. When he finally appeared a chant rolled across the vast floor of the cavern, building in volume as it came until it seemed to shake the walls with vocal thunder by the time it reached us.

A voice in Qadaki and another repeated in accented English for our benefit: "The Great King arrives!"

The hundreds of Qadakians bowed, scraping the muzzles of their great jaws against the bare rock of the cavern floor. The Ambassador looked at me but I shook my head—which meant that we should do no bowing.

The Qadakians carried rawhide shields—hide of the gigantic manlike beasts of burden, I realized—in their small forelimbs. As the Great King came down the living aisle they had made for him they shook their shields and it made a noise like the cavern roof collaps-

ing. Finally the Great King reached a high stone platform at one end of the cavern. Thick-muscled tail dragging, he mounted it and lifted his forelimbs for silence. The shields rattled once more, then were stilled. The Great King began to speak in a deep booming voice. The translator intoned:

"That you of Earth should take the trouble to send an Ambassadorial staff halfway across the galaxy is a tribute to the awe you must feel for the great civilization of Qadak, the most wonderful our galaxy has yet produced. We acknowledge this tribute as one we justly deserve, although in truth we had expected gifts and riches to accompany your Ambassadorial staff."

"Already they want to get on the interstellar gravy-train," Rob-in whispered.

But I shook my head. "It has nothing to do with that. The Qadakians are really megalomaniacs; that just wasn't a way of talking. But usually they lead up to it slowly," I added in a worried voice. "If they start off like this, I wonder what they'll finish up with."

The Great King had been talking all this while. I picked up the translators words with: ". . . must obey the Qadakian laws of diplomacy while here, not the Terran laws, since the Qadakian laws,

developed here, are obviously superior."

"That's impossible!" Ambassador Hurley said in a furious whisper. "The Terran Embassy always follows the interstellar covenants to the letter, not the system of some backward, out-of-the-way planet."

"The *Milky Way* is en route back to Ophiuchus," I pointed out. "It looks like you'll do whatever the Qadakians say. If you think I'm kidding, listen to what their Great King is saying now."

The translator intoned: "I therefore expectorate upon your culture. I cast the dung of our beasts of burden upon it. My people are mighty. I am mighty. The Qadakian civilization is older than the stars and brighter, and older even than the nebulae which spawned the stars before your paltry Earth, your insignificant Earth, was born."

"There are certain concessions we shall want in the nature of interstellar trade from your planet. It is a custom of Qadakian diplomatic procedure to hold for ransom a valuable asset of the delegation in question until such time as the concessions are granted. As Great King I therefore impound, since you have brought no treasure with you, the female member of your staff."

IT hit us like a thunderbolt. Ambassador Hurley's face turned purple with rage. He was so angry he couldn't speak. Robin gave me a weak smile as two Qadakians came clomping across the rocky floor toward her on their pillar-like hind legs.

I got my hand on Robin's shoulder and pulled her toward me, then behind me. I had spent a month on Qadak on my trail-blazing expedition. I knew something of the Qadakian customs and now I hoped it would be enough. I knew you had to push the Qadakians a long way, but there might be a point beyond which it was fatal. For Robin I had to find that point.

"Hold!" I shouted, consciously trying to ape the Qadakian Great King's flowery way of speaking. "You of Qadak are not worthy of the dung of your beasts of burden," I said as the translator put my words into Qadaki for his ruler. "You are not worthy of the dung of the fleas which inhabit the hair of your beasts of burden. You mock a civilization which has spanned a thousand thousand parsecs of space and challenges the doors of infinity itself, yet you have never lifted a clumsy foot off the face of your pebble of a planet."

I expected a shocked silence on the part of the Great King. But he didn't even bat a figurative eyelash as he countered, "Inter-

stellar travel holds utterly no fascination for the great Qadak people because on Qadak is the sum of all that is worthwhile in our galaxy and all that can ever be worthwhile. Take the woman, please!"

"Hold!" I cried again as the two Qadakians lumbered in our direction once more. But the Great King merely waved a forelimb for silence. Firelight wavered and danced all about us. I had removed my parka and stood there in jumper and slacks, a high-powered atomic pistol strapped at my waist. I pulled it clear of the holster and challenged: "Now you'll stop."

The Great King spoke. The translator said: "Kill the young Earthman." His voice sounded utterly indifferent, but you never could tell about a Qadaki voice.

A spear blurred through the air at me, whistled by my face, inches from the jawbone. Another tugged at the synthetic fabric of my jumper sleeve. Robin screamed. The Ambassador, weaponless, shook his fist and ranted.

I dropped quickly to one knee, took dead aim and blew the heads off each of the two advancing Qadakians. The dead decapitated bodies fell at our feet with two clearly audible thuds in the complete silence which had followed the two explosive roars of the

atomic pistol.

The Great King spoke and the translator translated, "You believe for a moment this impresses me? Two lives? Merely two? Behold."

The King roared some orders and the translator remained silent. A troop of archers trotted up from an alcove to the King's left, stationing themselves below his high rock platform and strung their bows. I thought we were finished. I thought I had gone too far—although I hadn't been able to help it: I had merely killed my own executioners. The archers had come to finish the job of execution, not merely on me but on all three of us.

The Qadakians let their arrows fly.

And sent them winging toward the thickest part of the Qadakian crowd!

A score of Qadakers fell, dead or dying. There were great hissing screams in the audience and the translator screamed: "See! Our Great King is mighty. For two that you have slain, he has killed fifty."

FIFTY was an exaggeration.

Twenty was more like it, but the point was well made. I killed two Qadakers. In terran terms it was murder, if defensible murder since the Qadakians had been

my executioners. But in Qadakian terms it wasn't murder at all. In Qadakian terms, it was merely a challenge cast before the Great King. *I have killed two of your subjects, the challenge said. Can you top this?*

The King had topped it all right. And we were in the same hole I had been trying to yank us out of, for the Great King said: "Take the woman so that I may present our demands."

Two more Qadakers advanced. I got down on one knee again with my atomic pistol, but Robin placed her slim fingers on my wrist and said, "Please, Ned. What good would it do? If they want to take me, they're going to take me."

"Over my dead body!" Ambassador Hurley roared.

"You too, Dad. You couldn't stop them. There are only two of you."

"Is that so?" The Ambassador said. "Ned's done a fine job of stopping them so far. Hasn't he?"

"At the cost of twenty lives," Robin said. "We don't want that. We didn't come here to fight a war with the Qadakians. We came here to start diplomatic relations with them, to welcome them into the expanding interstellar culture, to—"

"I'm beginning to think Ned was right," her father told Robin.

"These creatures aren't ready for diplomatic relations with us or anyone. But right now—"

"Right now," Robin insisted, "you're not going to lift a finger when they take me. They only want me for a hostage; they're not going to hurt me."

The Qadakians were very close now, but they were watching my atomic pistol and advancing warily. I looked at the Ambassador and shrugged. I wasn't in charge of this expedition.

He shrugged too. "Do as she says," he told me finally.

Robin ran to him and kissed him on the cheek, then came to me and nestled for a moment in my arms after I had buckled away the atomic pistol. She kissed me on the lips and darted away, confronting the Qadakians boldly, unafraid. They took her by the arms and led her off toward the alcove from which the archers had emerged. The archers formed a double file and followed them inside.

"She goes willingly," I told the Great King, and it was translated for him. "She goes willingly so as not to humble you at the outset of our relationship. We demand, however, that she not be harmed in any way."

I was told, "You are not in any position to demand." For the first time the Great King's boast

was pretty close to the truth when he added, "With your weapon you were able to kill two of my subjects, but with the primitive weapons at my disposal I slew twenty—ten times two—in the same period of time. For I am mighty, mightier far than you."

"We demand," I repeated, that she not be harmed."

"That depends on you," we were told. "When we present our demands—"

"Present them now," I said.

"Tomorrow, at our first meeting of state."

I leaped swiftly toward the alcove through which Robin and her captors and the two files of archers had vanished. I said, "Then I go with her until tomorrow."

As if by magic, three archers appeared in front of me, bowstrings taut, bows arched, arrows pointing at my chest.

"She goes alone," the Great King said.

I walked slowly back to where the Ambassador was waiting. My twenty-foot leaps in the direction of the alcove hadn't impressed the Great King at all. Or—if they had impressed him—he hid the fact very well.

"If they hurt her in any way," Ambassador Hurley told me, "I'll never forgive myself!"

"If they hurt her," I said, try-

ing to bolster the Ambassador's confidence, "they'll have to kill me first."

He looked at me gravely. He didn't say anything, but the look said: if they want to, they will.

THE next day, the Qadakian Great King presented his incredible demands. They were presented in the same palace cavern after a sleepless night in which the Ambassador and I had paced back and forth in the small, dark, damp cave allotted to us, but this time thousands of the Qadakians had squeezed in to hear how the Earth representatives would be humbled.

The Great King said:

"We of Qadak demand to have a representative with full voting power on every Terran voting body in existence, from the Senate of United Earth on down."

I got out the word "but"—and was interrupted.

"Actually," the Great King said, "this is more of a favor than a demand. Since we of Qadak are so superior intellectually to you of Earth, it will do your Senate and your other voting bodies a great deal of good to have the stabilizing influence of a Qadakin in their midst."

Patiently I tried to explain that by common interstellar tradition each world remained sovereign des-

pite intercourse with other worlds but that the well being of the denizens of each world was enhanced by free trade, competitive interstellar trade on a private enterprise basis, between worlds. It made a lot of sense to most worlds but it left the Great King of Qadak as cold as the deepest snow-filled ravine slashing the highest mountaintop on his planet.

All he said was, "We of Qadak do things differently. Naturally, ours is the correct way. Our second demand is that you permit our surplus population of some three hundred million Qadakian families to settle on some of your out-worlds. This too can hardly be regarded as a demand from your point of view. It is a favor since your people will clearly benefit from rich personal contact with ours."

"What are we going to do?" Ambassador Hurley whispered to me. "The demands are impossible. We can't even relay them on, can we?"

"I guess not," I said. "You're the diplomat."

"You wouldn't know it—here."

"Will they let us use a sub-space radio?"

"Probably. They don't quite understand what a radio does. Why?"

"Call the *Milky Way* back from Ophiuchus. We may have to evac-

uate."

"But what about my daughter. I'm not going to think of leaving without her."

"Did you think I would?"

"I'm sorry, Ned. I'm very upset, I guess."

I addressed the translator: "Before we can consider your insignificant demands, the customs of our own diplomatic procedure make it mandatory that the Earth girl be returned to us."

"That is impossible," said the Great King, "until all our demands are met."

"Tell them anything," the Ambassador said. "We don't have to go through with it. Obviously, Qadak isn't ready for diplomatic relations with civilized worlds."

"I'm not the Terran Secretary of State," I said, "and neither are you. But if the Terran Secretary of State tells us something—"

"He's never been here. He hasn't seen what it's like."

"Look, Ambassador. I agree with you. I was against this mission from the beginning. But since we're on it, I think we ought to do what we can. We ought to work under the assumption that the Secretary of State wants diplomatic relations maintained unless we hear otherwise."

"But my daughter—"

"I'll get your daughter," I said. "I have an idea, Ambassador. You

know those motion pictures we studied on the *Milky Way*, the ones explaining Qadakian ceremonies and customs—"

"Yes, of course. But this is no time to talk about motion pictures."

"Ask for a recess. Go to our quarters and bring the pictures here. And bring a projector. I think I have a way out of this." I didn't want to tell the Ambassador what my plan was. It seemed far fetched even to me, and I had dreamed it up. But I was beginning to think it was our only chance.

AMBASSADOR Hurley asked for and was granted the recess. I waited until he was gone, then headed for the alcove through which the Qadakians had taken Robin. A bowman seven feet tall, his great dinosaur mouth leering barred my way.

He said something and the translator boomed: "You are not to pass!"

"Tell him to get out of my way or I will kill him," I said.

The translator spoke in his native tongue. The bowman strung an arrow. He stood not fifteen feet in front of me and pointed his arrow at my chest.

From somewhere behind him, Robin cried: "I can see you, Ned! Don't do anything foolhardy,

please. I think they've been given orders not to hurt me—so far."

"Then scream," I said.

"Scream?"

"Scream," I repeated, and waited as she did so. It was a man-sized bellow for a slim girl like Robin, and it brought the Qadakian guard's dinosaur head pivoting around on its immense neck. I sprang forward and slashed the butt of my pistol across the base of the large skull. At first there was utterly no reaction and I was afraid the Qadak had been immune to the blow. But then he wheeled to face me slowly, dropping the bow as he came around. When we stood again face to face the Qadakian collapsed at my feet.

I leaped over his great body and sprinted down a dim passageway. It twisted to the left and widened into a small bare room with a single cot against one wall. Standing at the entranceway was Robin. I hugged her quickly, then she withdrew and I took her hand and said, "Your Dad should be outside now with his projector."

"You mean movie projector?"

I said that was exactly what I meant.

"But I don't see—"

I tugged her toward the main gallery of the cavern. I wasn't sure I saw it either.

AS we reappeared near the body of the still-supine guard, the Great King roared something and the translator said, "Since you have disobeyed me, you must die."

"Oh, Ned," Robin cried. "Why did you have to—"

But I called out in a loud voice: "I issue a challenge, O King. Can you have me killed before the challenge is accepted?"

"No. A challenge will always be honored."

I was banking on that. Qadakian pride had saved my life—for the moment. But would it save the day for us?

The Ambassador appeared luging a trim modern motion picture projector and a reel of film. I set the machine up on a small outcropping of rock and began to check the connections when the translator said:

"We of Qadak couldn't possibly be interested in your childish gadgets. Kill this man."

Archers advanced, but I held my hands up and spoke swiftly, knowing I had no more than seconds. "Hear me, O King. Yesterday I slew two of your people in self-defense. You immediately killed ten for one, showing how great your power was compared to mine."

"That was but a sample," came the translator's words after the Great King had halted the archers

in their tracks with a wave of his hand. "I 'can kill a hundred to one. I can kill a hundred of my subjects for each you slay. I am mighty."

Robin looked at me with sudden anger in her eyes. "You'd kill them in cold blood, just to—"

"It's his life or theirs," Ambassador Hurley said, but I shook my head and told them:

"I hope it's neither." I shouted, "And if you cannot, O Great King? If you fail?"

"That is an impossibility."

"Nevertheless, if you fail?"

"Very well, if I fail we will conduct our relationships with Earth and the other planets of the galaxy according to your foolish traditions."

"Can you trust him?" Ambassador Hurley asked me.

"I think so. If he fails, his pride will be hurt. He'll be craven. There's no middle road, not right away, for a megalomaniac."

"But if I succeed," the Great King said, "your life will be immediately forfeit. Is it a bargain?"

"Yes," I said. My hands shook as I threaded the motion picture film. It was archaic twenty-first century style film because I had taken the pictures myself on my first exploratory trip to Qadak and an explorer has to watch his budget and will often make do with outdated, second-hand equipment.

Soon a square of yellow light appeared on one wall of the cavern.

"As near as I can figure," I told the Ambassador, "there's one shot here that shows a hundred thousand Qadakians marching toward this palace through a deep valley which leads here from their capital city. When the film reaches that frame, stop it. Project that frame on the wall and hold it there. You understand?"

"Yes, but—"

"O. K.," I said, and started the machine.

The Qadakians oo'd and ah'd as lifesize images of themselves appeared on the wall. Even the inscrutable king seemed impressed, although he tried to hide it.

"Watch," I said, "as with Ter-ran magic I make your people spring to life from the naked rock wall of this cavern. You believe in this magic?"

"It is a magic I have not seen before," the Great King admitted. Coming from him, it was a mighty concession, but he immediately added, "I await your challenge, Earthman. I will kill a hundred of my subjects for each one you slay. If I fail, we bow to your diplomacy. If I win, you die."

The old projector purred on. Half a dozen archers advanced and took their positions ten yards ahead of us, arrows strung and ready. If the King succeeded, I

wouldn't survive his success more than a few seconds.

I wasn't even watching the film. I knew it by heart. There would be a series of shots on Qadaki local customs, then the climactic filming of the great march of a hundred thousand Qadakians on the royal palace-cave. And then, success or failure. Life or death.

"Here it is," Ambassador Hurley said finally. "Here it is, Ned." He touched a switch and the projector ground to a stop. I looked up at the wall and saw the square of light projected by the machine showing a huge gorge a mile or so down the mountain trail. The gorge was packed with Qadakians. My first estimate of a hundred thousand had been conservative. There was no telling how many Qadakians were assembled there, but I figured the number was probably closer to a hundred and fifty thousand.

"Out of nothingness, O Great King," I cried, "I produce this vast throng of your people. You see?"

"I see," the Great King said. You could tell he was awed.

I turned a switch for the sound track. The roar of the crowd and the thunderous stamping of their great feet came to us.

"Now watch, O Great King," I said. I didn't have to say it. He

was watching, all right. His small eyes had grown very round. They were practically popping from his dinosaur head. Even the archer-executioners looked interested.

As calm as I could—but my hands were trembling—I lit a match and touched it to the motion picture film. The film curled, I looked up at the wall. Great brown blisters appeared as if by magic, consuming the vast throng projected there. In a moment it was over. The wall was now a blank.

The Qadaks rattled their shields. The archers waited, motionless, for their orders.

As far as the Great King knew, I had killed some hundred and fifty thousand of his subjects. To win our wager, he would have to slay some fifteen million of his people. He said nothing at first. He stared at the wall for a long time, trying to conjure an image of the square of light as it had been, filled with his subjects. Then, slowly, he stepped down from the high stone platform and came stomping across the cavern toward us. The archers parted before him and he advanced as if they weren't there. When he reached us he stopped and stared at me, harder than he had stared at the wall.

Finally he spoke and the translator said: "This great feat I cannot match, let alone increase

a hundredfold."

"So?" I said arrogantly.

"So I am yours to command."

And he prostrated himself on the floor of the cavern before us.

THE next day, the *Milky Way* returned in answer to Ambassador Hurley's urgent radio summons, but he told the captain:

"I guess it was a false alarm. It's all right now. Everything is all right, thanks to Ned Talbert."

The captain nodded. "Confidentially, that's why State sent Talbert."

"But how do you know?" the Ambassador demanded.

"Because I work for the State Department. You see, Ambassador, they knew the Qadakians were megalomaniacs. At the beginning, an ordinary embassy staff couldn't hope to cope with them. To match their megalomania we needed someone who was supremely independent and self-confident—who, in short, but an explorer who always has to rely on his own initiative? Who but Ned Talbert?"

"Listen," I said. "That doesn't

mean I'm going to stick around indefinitely. There's a lot of uncharted space to be explored and I want to do my share."

"Not alone, you won't," Robin said, holding my hand.

"Not alone," I told her.

The *Milky Way* Captain said: "We'll need you for a few more months, Talbert. You're our guarantee. The Great King was humbled by you. There's no middle road for him right now, you see? He's either master or slave. He'll be slave until Qadak begins to understand the ways of interstellar democracy, then you'll be free to go where you will. All right?"

I said it was all right if that was what the State Department wanted. I told him he could explain the rest of it to Ambassador Hurley and walked off with Robin.

There was another kind of exploration that could be done right now, and I wasn't any better at it than any other man. It was high time I began to explore the beginning of my life together with Robin

THE END



"Empty" Space



INTERSTELLAR space is, by all Terran standards, a superb vacuum, a volume of nothingness. The finest vacuum pumps on Earth can't produce a vacuum equivalent

to that of outer space except with the most elaborate preparations. Consider the vacuum that exists between our Solar System and the star Chi Orionis. It is estimated that the

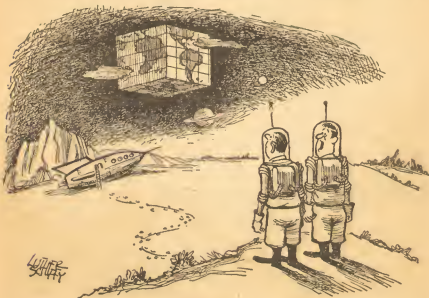
number of molecules in this space per cubic meter is one billion-billionth that of atmospheric pressure!

Scientists measure this minute quantity of matter per volume of space by noting how much light is absorbed by that matter during spectroscopic observation. From a macroscopic point of view space clearly is empty.

But from an atomic, microscopic viewpoint, interstellar space is far from empty. This is a typical inventory of the contents of a cubic meter of space between the Sun and Chi Orionis: 11 million electrons, 11 million protons, 84 Sodium atoms, 12 Potassium atoms, 5 Calcium atoms, 1 Titanium atom. That is at once emptiness and full-

ness depending on your view. It is emptier than the best vacuum tubes on Earth—yet matter is there.

The only time when that matter in space will have to be considered as matter, is when an interstellar journey is attempted, an interstellar journey undertaken at speeds approaching the velocity of light. That tenuous matter will then offer an appreciable resistance, but at ordinary speeds it is of course utterly intangible. Astronomers are learning that in intergalactic space much higher vacua exist. In these regions the numbers of atoms per cubic meter number not more than one or two! That is true emptiness, and that is what most of the universe consists of!



"When we get back we'd better just not mention it."

The Girl From Nowhere

by

Darius John Granger

She appeared out of nowhere, a strange beautiful girl haunted by fear and terror. It was up to Bill to help her — but from what? . . .

THE first thing I noticed about her as she stood there on the shoulder of the blacktop road was that she had no suitcase. Since she was also the most beautiful girl I had ever seen, that was one hell of a thing to notice. But I'm an insurance investigator by profession and they pay me to notice the od-

dities of people I run across.

I stopped the car. I had to. I don't ordinarily pick up hitchhikers, but we were a dozen miles from nowhere in Central Florida and I couldn't see her trudging all the way through the dust and the heat to the next town, a dot on my roadmap called Swamp Crossings.





Her long blonde hair was held back in a pony tail. Her eyes were exactly the color of cool blue mountain lakes and if that sounds trite I can't help it because her eyes really *were* that impossible blue color. She was wearing a fawn-colored skirt and a pale translucent blouse through which you could see her tawny skin. She had a figure straight out of Esquire Magazine.

"How far are you going?" I said, leaning across the front seat of my convertible and opening the door on her side.

"The further the better," she said, and gave me a little smile. "Miami, maybe?"

I grinned. "You ought to know, lady. Come on in."

She entered the car in a little fluid motion and pulled the door shut after her. I gunned the motor and we were on our way toward Swamp Crossings together.

"Are you going that far?" she said.

I shook my head. "Town twenty miles south of Swamp Crossings. I have business there."

"Central Florida in the summer. I don't envy you."

"It is hot, all right. Bill," I added. "Bill's the name. Bill Parness."

"I don't usually hitch-hike, Bill."

She was saying all the expected things. Where are you going and hot isn't it and I don't usually do this sort of thing. But all the expected things somehow had a new freshness when she said them. We barreled along for a while at sixty, the live oaks festooned with beards of Spanish moss whizzing by on both sides of the road. I lit a cigaret and tossed the pack in her lap and watched from the corner of my eye as she thrust one of the cigarets between her red lips.

She was looking down at her hands. She wasn't looking at the rear-view mirror, I remember that distinctly. And she said in a strained voice. "Bill. Bill, we're being followed."

I glanced up at the rear-view mirror. "Car back there," I agreed. "But why does that mean we're being followed? Maybe somebody else is also nuts and heading for Swamp Crossings in the middle of the summer."

"No. We're being followed. I know we're being followed."

"Hey, take it easy." I said that because she sounded suddenly, desperately frightened.

"They want to kill me, Bill. I beg you. Drive faster."

I pushed the gas pedal down to the floor although I didn't believe her, not yet anyway. The con-

vertible surged forward and I stole another glance at the girl. She hadn't turned around. As far as I could tell, she still hadn't looked up at the rear-view mirror. "They're gaining," she said.

"What have you got, eyes in the back of your head?"

"I'm sorry. I should have looked, shouldn't I?"

"What the hell do you mean you should have looked?"

"So you wouldn't think anything was funny."

They were gaining. They were driving a late model sedan, a big black job with more than two hundred horses straining and roaring under its hood. It looked like something out of a grade B Hollywood thriller, the kind that used to be produced on a shoestring to run as a second feature and is now produced on a shoe string for television. The guys in it ought to be speaking some impossible foreign accent.

I smiled. Pretty soon the girl would have me believing we were being followed by person or persons who wanted to kill her. Suddenly something exploded behind us. It sounded exactly like a pistol shot.

It was.

They fired again and the fly window on my side of the car erupted in a million fragments. The side of my face was peppered with

glass. "Well, God damn it!" I swore, and slammed on the brakes.

It was the worst thing I could have done under the circumstances, but I was mad. The convertible slid across the road shoulder and lurched to a stop, fishtailing slightly. The girl screamed. I leaned across her knees and popped open the glove compartment and took out a large three battery flashlight. It wasn't much of a weapon, but it was the only thing I had. I leaped from the convertible just as the big black job slid smoothly to a stop alongside of us.

There were two men in the car, but they didn't stay inside it very long. They came charging out across the road shoulder and they looked capable, mean, and deadly. One of them had a gun in his hand, so I launched myself at him without waiting to think. The gun went off somewhere inside my head and cordite burned the side of my face. I felt my shoulder strike him at the beltline and he was solid as a rock. He grunted and backed up and his arm swept up and then down. He hadn't said a word since their car stopped and he wasn't saying anything now. He brought his automatic down in a hard slashing blow across my head, the sights raking a stinging furrow from crown to right ear.

Central Florida opened an enor-

mous hole directly in front of my feet. I jumped in headfirst and pulled the blacktop road in after me.

IT was a fountain with a slick wet inside and I was trying to climb up toward the spout. I got my hands on the lip and pulled, straining my muscles. That's what you have between your ears, I thought. Muscles. Only muscles. Because don't you know you're not supposed to pick up hitch-hikers?

The slick wet fountain assumed its proper identity. It was the fender of my convertible and I was dragging myself to my feet alongside of it. The slick wetness was my own blood. I had explored the gash on my head while half-conscious and my hands were covered with blood.

I stood up. Bright, hot sunshine. Live oaks and scrub pine and palmettos and a brassy bright sky. And my car.

It had happened, all right. All that was left of the fly window was the chrome frame and a few shards of stubborn glass.

The black car was gone. Its occupants, thank you, were gone too.

They had taken the girl.

I shrugged. Even that slight motion sent shooting pains through my head. It wasn't any of my business. It looked like kidnapping,

though, and when I got to Swamp Crossings I would report it to what passed for the local police. Finish. End of the line for Bill Parness.

I climbed behind the wheel of the convertible and sat there for a few moments with my chin against my chest, concentrating on breathing. I fumbled out a cigaret and lit it and inhaled as hard as I could and that helped a little. My wristwatch said it was three-fifteen. It couldn't have been more than one-thirty when I picked up the girl. I ground the starter and pointed the convertible's nose south and off we went toward Swamp Crossings.

Swamp Crossings was a tired, dusty town with more Spanish moss beards on live oak trees than people. The town was a dozen or so ramshackle wood shacks, a gas station, a general store like something from old New England history transplanted to the deepest south, and an improbable motel. Improbable because it was large and brick with gleaming white carports between the square brick cabin units and an air of doing well and a sufficient number of cars already bedded down in the carports to confirm this.

I stopped at the gas-station before I went to the police because the convertible's tank was almost bone dry. While they were filling her I went to find the little boy's

room and found today's newspaper on the red coke stand just this side of the entrance. It was a Jax paper and the southern office of the insurance firm I work for has its headquarters in Jacksonville. A grease-monkey stuck his head out of the door and scowled at the caked blood in my hair and on my hands.

All I saw of the newspaper was the headline and a picture. It was enough. The headline said:

HOMICIDAL MANIAC ESCAPES FROM CENTRAL STATE MENTAL HOSPITAL

The picture was of a beautiful girl with blonde hair and eyes which looked only gray in the black and white newspaper reproduction but which you somehow knew were the blue of mountain lakes. She was the girl I had picked up on the blacktop road north of Swamp Crossings.

I picked up the newspaper with trembling hands. It was the girl, all right. The article said that the "beautiful madwoman," the "mass murderess" had slugged a guard and gone over the fence at Central State shortly before noon. She was violent, dangerous, and, as far as the police knew, unarmed.

Nice work, Parness. You don't pick-up hitch-hikers. When you finally do pick one up, she's a nut.

And her keepers claimed her.

Like a hole in the head, her keepers had claimed her! Like the hole in the head they had given me. Because they wouldn't have fired at the convertible. And they wouldn't have slugged me.

They weren't her keepers. But they had been after her.

Tell the police? What proof did I have — besides the shattered fly window, which could have happened any number of ways, and the gashed head which I could have stumbled and hit like that?

It looked like I wouldn't be going to the police.

I went inside the latrine and washed my face and head with cold water. I came out dripping wet and as the moisture evaporated and cooled me, I began to feel better. I had a coke and climbed back into the convertible. I paid the man and the man smiled at me mechanically, the way they will in service stations anywhere.

I drove only as far as the motel. Close up, it looked even nicer. There was an office and in the office was a brunette with a little too much flesh but otherwise quite pretty. She signed me up for a room and gave me the key and next door to the office there was a restaurant where they also sold packaged liquor. I bought a bottle of bourbon and took it back to my cabin with me. My head still

ached, but the fierceness had gone out of it. Now it ached with a dull throbbing pain.

You can still go to the cops, I thought. You know you can, don't you? There really isn't any reason why they wouldn't believe your story. Then why don't you go to them?

Because the girl hadn't acted nuts, that's why. Because she had been beautiful and perfectly rational and somehow this whole thing made less sense than some of Lewis Carroll's poetry.

I drove over to the carport which bordered on my cabin and parked the convertible in there. I climbed out. There was a side door leading into the cabin. I toted the bourbon and opened the door to the cabin. It was delightfully air-conditioned inside. I closed the door behind me.

The beautiful blonde madwoman was waiting inside the cabin.

“DON'T yell,” she said softly. “Who's yelling?”

“You look like you're about to yell.”

“Lady,” I said, crossing the room to the bed and sitting down on it, “why me? Why did you have to pick me? Not once, but twice?”

“Because I thought you would help me.”

“You thought . . . but how did you know I'd come here? And how

did you get away from your boy-friends?”

“I jumped out of their car when they stopped for a red light on the edge of town. Naturally, they're looking for me.”

“Will they find you as easily as you found me?”

“Yes, I'm afraid so. You see, we all have the same psychic abilities.”

“Who all?” I said. In a situation like this, all I could do was play the straight man. The straighter the better. I thumb-nailed the bourbon and found a glass with a sanitary wrapper which proclaimed that it had been sterilized with ultraviolet light. I spilled some bourbon in the glass and held it out to the blonde but she shook her head. I poured the bourbon down my own throat and felt nothing.

“Those men and myself,” the girl answered finally.

“Listen, sister,” I said, spilling some more bourbon into the glass and drinking it, “I want you to know I read the papers.”

“You mean about the girl in the lunatic asylum?”

“Yeah.”

“You think I'm the girl?”

“Yeah. They had your picture.”

“Well, in a way. Yes, in a way I'm that girl. But I'm not actually that girl. Of course, you don't understand.”

"You're beginning to talk like she's supposed to talk."

"I can't help it, Bill. Im sorry. If you were trying to explain a jet plane to a reasonably intelligent chimpanzee, how would you go about it?"

"Im the reasonably intelligent chimpanzee?"

"I'm sorry."

"No, go ahead. You're making it easier for me to call the cops."

"Bill."

"You thing I'm kidding?"

"Well, you'd better be," she said, and showed me a big automatic. "I took this from them. I'd hate to use it on you."

"Hell," I said, "that's all right. You killed before. The newspaper said so."

"I'm not that girl, Bill. You've got to believe me."

"Give me some idea *how* I can believe you."

"The way I found you here. The way I came here before you came. The way I knew you would come. Is that normal?"

"No. But it could have been an accident."

"What are the odds."

"O. K. Let's say I buy it. What is it supposed to mean?"

"I have special abilities, Bill. I'm not a native of your world."

"You mean of Florida? Me neither. I come from Deer Park, Illi-

nois. Me and Ernest Hemingway."

"No. I'm not talking about Florida. I'm talking about the planet Earth."

"Hey now wait a minute."

"I come from somewhere else."

"But —"

"The chimpanzee, remember? I'm trying to explain to you."

"All right. Where do you come from? You and those men? From Mars? I read all about Mars in the Sunday supplements."

"Not from Mars."

"Then from the fourth dimension via a tesseract? They had that in the Sunday supplements too."

"See? You can't understand. You're making fun of me."

"I'll listen."

"I come from nowhere, Bill —"

"But you said —"

"Let's stop interrupting each other. I said I come from nowhere. Perhaps anywhere would be better. Anywhere there happens to be a point of juxtaposition between our universes. You see, you had the right idea when you spoke of the fourth dimension. Of course, it isn't numbered like that. They never are."

"Oh sure," I said.

"There is, however, a five dimensional barrier which separates your world from mine. It can be crossed — well, anywhere. The doorways float, sort of. That's the only way

I can explain it. That's why I said I come from nowhere, or anywhere, or everywhere. You understand?"

I shook my head. "But you might as well go on."

SHE smiled. It was a lovely smile. She was a lovely girl but she made less sense than the homicidal maniac she was supposed to be. "We have certain psychic talents there," she said. "That ought to be proof for you. Like the way I knew we were being followed without looking. You noticed that?"

"Yeah, I noticed that."

"Like the way I came here and knew you were on your way."

"It was the only place to stop in town. You could have bribed the girl out front to give me this particular cabin."

"Do you think I did?"

"Well, no."

"You know I didn't."

"Are you trying to tell me you — well, you came here and kind of took possession of that mad girl's body?"

"You have excellent intuition, Bill. That's exactly what I'm trying to tell you. Your history is full of stories of possession, isn't it? I'm not the first of my people who have come here. The first one you have any record of is the Egyptian King Iknahton. Then there was a man named Shadrach and a Cos-

ian Greek called Herodotus and a Mongol named Genghis Khan and a Mexican called Pancho Villa —"

"Are you serious?" I asked. I looked at her face and she nodded but I had already seen it in her eyes. There was no necessity to nod. "All those important people?" I went on. "Iknahton, the first monotheist and Herodotus the first historian and Genghis Kahn, the greatest conqueror the world has ever known and — but you, what are you going to do for our world?"

She laughed softly. "Nothing very special," she said.

"Well, what?"

"And it's not for your world in my case, anyhow. It's for mine."

"But what are you going to do?"

"Oh, I'm going to have babies."

I said, "please say that again."

"To have babies. You see, I'm of the royal blood of my world, but there has been an insurrection. Our futurcasters assure us the resurrection won't last twenty-five of your years. Meanwhile, if I can continue the royal line here, then send my sons back to rule at the proper time —"

"And the revolutionists sent those two men here after you," I said, "to stop you, to kill you if necessary."

"Exactly. But the only way we

can exist in your world is if we inhabit the body of another person. Such occupation or possession or whatever you want to call it, destroys the other person's mind completely and permanently."

"Oh," I said with accusation in my voice. "You mean that's why she was a homicidal maniac."

"No. That's not why at all. I chose her *because* she was a maniac. I didn't make her one. Entering her brain destroys her mind, so I selected a mad girl. It — it's better that way, don't you think? She was violent, Bill. She was hopelessly insane. The laws of your state only kept her alive. They are archaic laws, someday you will see. Besides, in my world there's more at stake than the life of one mad girl. There's a civilization at stake. Do you see?"

"I think so," I said. "Since you had to occupy someone's body you selected someone who'd be missed least of all, someone who —"

"Exactly. Naturally, though, I'll have to hide all my life here. Because they won't stop looking for her, Bill. They still think she's mad. It will be a lonely life but a happy one, I think, for me and the man I've selected for my mate, the man who will sire the royal blood of my universe."

"You mean will select, don't you? Because you haven't decided yet.

I take it you only just got here."

"You're wrong. We studied the situation before I arrived. We've already selected who my mate is to be."

"Some historical figure?" I guessed. "Some famous man?"

"He will be historical and famous, in my world."

"What's his name?"

When she answered me, my mouth fell open about three feet. "Bill Parness, silly," she said with a smile.

I mouthed some kind of protest, I don't remember what. She merely smiled a beautiful and complacent smile and nodded when I offered her the bourbon bottle again. She poured some into the glass for herself and raised it in a toast to me, then sipped.

And the telephone on the nightstand purred.

"Don't answer it, Bill!" she cried.

I shook my head at her and lifted the receiver from the cradle. "Mr. Parness?" a voice said. "Mr. Bill Parness?"

"Speaking."

"Just answer my questions with a brief yes or no. You're in deadly danger, Mr. Parness. Do you understand me?" He had a deep voice and no accent at all. He spoke like a native of — well, any-

where.

"Yes," I said. I looked at the girl. She was staring at me intently.

"There's a woman with you? Quite beautiful? Blonde?"

"Yes."

"The girl who runs the motel described her, you see. She saw her go in there. Do you know who the woman is, Parness?"

"No," I said.

"She's a homicidal maniac. She's escaped from Central State. Don't you read the papers?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe me? Do you believe your life is in danger from her?"

"No."

"For your own good, you had better. Did she give you a crazy story about coming from a world of parallel dimensions?"

"Yes." *

"That's our girl, all right. She's dangerous, Parness. I can't tell you how dangerous."

"I don't think I believe you."

"What is it, Bill?" the girl asked.

The telephone voice advised me: "You fool just answer me in yes and no. Did she also say she wanted to marry you so together you could be the parents of royalty in that insane world of hers?"

"Yes," I admitted. When she had told it to me, earnestly, convinc-

ingly, I had believed. Or I had almost believed. Now the way the man told it, it sounded ridiculous, sounded like the wild dreams of a dangerously paranoid person.

"She's a paranoid," the man on the telephone said. "Can you keep her there? Can you keep her amused until we come for her? Without letting her realize what's going to happen?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm Dr. Carey of Central State. Do you believe me?"

"I don't know," I said.

"As you value your life, Mr. Parness, keep her amused. We'll be right there." The telephone went click in my ear. I was holding a dead wire. I hung up.

"He says he's from Central State," I told the girl. "He says you're crazy and invented that story about parallel dimensions for my benefit. He says you've used it before. He says he's coming here for you."

"Why are you telling me this, Bill? Do you believe me or do you believe him?"

"I want to believe you," I said.

"I don't want to believe him."

"But —"

"Remember the chimpanzee," I said.

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. He's coming here. Will he look the same as the man

who slugged me?"

"Either him or the driver. They possessed the bodies of two of the doctors at Central State. You see, they don't care. It didn't have to be someone insane or moribund for them. Anyone convenient would do. They're completely amoral, Bill. Do you understand that?"

"Hell," I said, "if they have the same mental powers you have, you couldn't hide from them. Well, could you? They'd be able to follow you anywhere, wouldn't they?"

"These two are the only ones who could, believe me. They'd never be able to find me, the revolutionists, if these two were dead."

I frowned. "I'm trying to believe," I said. "The newspapers told how the girl was a homicidal maniac. Now you say you want to kill them. Two doctors from Central State."

"They're not doctors. They've possessed the doctors. And if we don't kill them, they'll kill us. Not just me. Us. Do you think your life means anything to them. Do you?"

"I don't know what to think," I said.

Someone knocked at the door.

"WHO is it?" I called sharply in a tight, anxious voice.

"Dr. Carey, Mr. Parness. You

have her?"

The girl looked at me. Without a word she gave me the big automatic butt-first. I looked at it and at the door and tried to see through the heavy wood paneling. I looked at the girl.

"I'll open the door," I said. "But I'm armed and I haven't made up my mind yet. Come in with your hands up."

"Really, Parness. This is quite unnecessary."

"With your hands up or no way at all."

"If you insist."

I opened the door and he marched into the light. I shut the door behind him, kicking it closed with my foot.

"Cautious, aren't you?" he said.

He was a small round man with a long nose and a broad brow and rimless glasses. I had never seen him before in my life. "I'm Dr. Carey," he said. "There now, Miss Martin. If you will come quietly—"

"Don't touch me," she said. "I'm no more Miss Martin than you're Dr. Carey and you know it and I know it and I think Bill Parness knows it too. I'm the last member of the royal family who can have children and you want to take me back home and kill me . . ."

Dr. Carey looked at me, offering a what-did-I-tell-you smile. I wasn't buying from either company

yet. I didn't know what to think.

"Are you alone?" I asked Dr. Carey.

"No, but why do you ask?"

"Will the other man help you take Miss Martin back to Central State?"

"Of course."

"From here?"

"Yes."

"And he's waiting here now?"

"In the office. Yes, but —"

"Call him."

"I don't understand why —"

"Call him."

"Very well," Dr. Carey said. "If you insist." He opened the door and shouted into the late afternoon sunlight: "Dr. Nardell. Oh, Dr. Nardell!"

A few moments later, footsteps came across the gravel from the motel office. I held the automatic and waited. The door was open. The girl stood alongside the doorframe and Dr. Carey stood silhouetted in the doorway, facing outside. I was behind him. I lit a cigaret. Dr. Carey stepped aside as the other man entered the cabin. He was a tall fellow. He was thickly muscled. He looked very strong.

"This is Dr. Nardell," Dr. Carey said.

I had seen the tall man before. He was the man who had slugged me on the road north of Swamp Crossings.

I whipped the gun up and said, "Stand still. Don't bother coming any further. If you take another step, I'll kill you,"

Dr. Nardell stood quite still. He was suddenly pale. He was the man with the muscles and he was the man I watched.

So Dr. Carey kicked the gun from my hand.

ANOTHER automatic appeared magically in Dr. Nardell's hand. "Watch them," Carey said.

"I'll get the car. We can't kill them here naturally."

"Don't blame yourself," the girl told me. "You tried your best to understand. I — I'm proud of you."

Carey drove the big black car around to the front of the cabin. "What about his car?" Nardell asked.

Behind the wheel, Carey shrugged. "He'll be missing. In the swamps, they'll never find him. Come on in, everybody."

We climbed into the rear of the car, Nardell and his automatic between us. The girl said nothing. There was nothing to say. The car door slammed. We headed south and into the swamps which had given the town its name.

We drove for about three or four miles, the blacktop cutting straight toward the horizon across low swamps where man-

groves and palmetto grew. You could smell the brackish water and hear the whine of a million insects as the sun touched flame to the horizon and began to sink below it. The car stopped. Across the flat gray stretch of the road shoulder the swamp water was crimson with the light of the setting sun.

"Out," Dr. Nardell said.

He opened the door and the girl got out. He went out backwards after her, watching me, while Carey came out of the front of the car and watched her. He pointed into the swamp, holding the girl's arm with his hand. He was a small round man and unarmed. But Nardell was big and carried a gun and I knew now without having to be told that he would use it, that he was going to use it as soon as we had trudged and waded far enough off the road.

The dirty swamp water closed about my ankles, then my knees. We walked. The bottom felt sloppy underfoot. The gnarled, tangled air-roots of the mangroves soon hid the car and the blacktop from sight. Mosquitos whined and buzzed about my head. I slapped at them, and Nardell and Carey and the girl were slapping like that too. It's funny what you will do even when death approaches.

"This is far enough," Dr. Carey said.

Nardell nodded. "You see, my

dear," he said, "we could have merely returned you to Central State if you hadn't involved this man. No one would have believed your story, coming from a mad-woman, a homicidal maniac. But now he's in this too and so I'm very much afraid both of you must die."

"Where would you like it?" Nardell asked, pointing his automatic at me.

It was a question which I suppose no one has ever answered. I merely shrugged. I waited. There was absolutely nothing I could do but I knew all at once I wouldn't just die standing there. If he was going to shoot me he was going to have a fight on his hands, even if it only lasted the split second it took him to pull the trigger.

I said, "I hear the heart is quickest. Do you think the heart is quickest?"

NARDELL opened his mouth to say something. I swung for his face and dropped toward the ground at the same time. I didn't hit his face. I hit him in the gut at the same moment he fired the automatic. The bullet barely creased the top of my scalp, stunning me. I felt myself falling. I rolled over, landing on my back in the brackish water. The girl screamed. I kicked out with my foot and the heel of

my shoe struck Nardell's kneecap. He howled and I heard Carey below something, then I scrambled to my feet and began to run.

The girl was running too, ahead of me. Carey was stooped over, clutching his stomach. Nardell lunged after us, limping, but making as much progress in the swamp as we could on two good feet a piece. And Nardell still had his gun.

He fired twice. I could hear him lumbering in after us, deeper into the swamp, but I couldn't see him. The mangrove roots were thick here, hanging like everything else with Spanish moss. It was murky with dusk-light and the mosquitos were fierce.

The girl tripped and went sprawling as her foot caught on a low air-root. "My ankle," she said, gasping with pain. "I can't get up."

"You've got to." I pulled her to her feet, but she collapsed against me. I set her down and instead of waiting for Nardell, ran back toward him. He wouldn't expect that, I thought.

He didn't.

I met him so suddenly there in the dim murkiness that he didn't even fire his automatic. We came together splashing and kicking awkwardly in waist-deep water. I got a couple of good ones in at Nardell's belly and he floundered

back through the swamp water grunting in pain. With my left hand I held his right wrist. He had the gun in his right hand and if he got it free I would be a dead man. We fought back and forth that way and then with his free hand Nardell found my throat. He had large strong fingers and began to apply pressure. My vision began to blur and I felt my legs going weak after what seemed a very short time. I pounded Nardell's kidney with my own free hand, the fist balled, swinging the arm back and forth like a sledge-hammer.

He let go of my throat. He screamed. He screamed in pain, abruptly, unexpectedly, almost like a woman. He was a big muscular man but had absorbed too much pain. He brought the gun around in front of him and I still held on. He was weakened now. I sobbed the breath into my lungs and was stronger than he was as we fought there, but he didn't know that. When he discovered it, it was too late. He forced the gun up between us. When he thought it was right, he squeezed the trigger.

His hand was numb. He hadn't been able to tell. I had forced the gun around and Nardell shot himself point-blank in the belly.

I let him fall. I stood up, gagging on bile. Someone was screaming. I turned and ran six paces into the

slime. Carey and the girl were struggling there, waist deep. It was Carey who had screamed.

"Quicksand!" the girl cried.

I ran to the mangroves and yanked at the air-roots. It should have taken more strength than I had, but the roots somehow came loose in my hands. I dropped them across the quicksand, spreading them. The girl grabbed at them. Carey tried to also but couldn't quite reach them. It was better that way. The girl's story was true. I knew now, knew without a doubt, completely true. Nardell was dead. And Carey had to die. Since neither of us could kill him in cold blood as he floundered helplessly there, it was a stroke of luck that we couldn't rescue him.

I pulled the girl to safety, and sobbing, she sat at my side. "Please," Carey said in a weak tired desperately afraid voice. "Please, please." The sands had drifted to his armpits.

I shoved the mangrove roots back at him. The girl said nothing. He could only get one hand up over the roots. "Please," he said again. He bubbled as his mouth reached the sand-line. Both his hands were under. His nose went.

His eyes and his head remained.

Please, his eyes said.

Then there were only sluggish ripples.

I didn't have to be told. I went back and got Nardell. He was dead. He already felt somewhat cool to the touch. I carried him to the quicksand and dropped his body in there after Carey's. We went back to the car.

"We'll have to get away," the girl told me.

"I don't even know your name."

"They wanted to kill us. They had to die."

"Yeah," I said.

"I'll tell you my name. I'll tell you anything. You know what's going to happen, Bill? We'll get over this. We'll mend inside. The futur-casters can't be wrong and they said we would learn to love each other and we would marry and our children would bring freedom back to my world. You believe all that, don't you?"

I looked at her. She was haggard and cut and bruised but she was beautiful. I hardly knew her, but I would know her very well. I would fall in love with her. Somehow, I knew it was fated. "I believe it," I said, and squeezed her hand. "Let's get out of here."

THE END

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— SEE PAGE 130 FOR BONUS OFFER —

Hardwick had been selected as overseer
for the next Lumlus hunt — stalking his fellow
Earthmen. He could let them die, or make it —



A DAY FOR BATTLE

by

C. H. Thames

IT was a small crowded room by human standards. It was cluttered with trapeezes and wires for the Lumlus youngsters, cluttered with incomprehensible toys, cluttered with heads.

The heads were human heads and there were too many of them to be in good taste. One magnificent specimen, however, commanded your attention as you entered the

room. It was the mounted head of a man in the prime of life, a red-faced man, a man who had died angry, a man with enormous mustaches stiffly waxed, a man with a thick muscular neck which was mounted in the brick wall of the mantlepiece. Under the head on a plaque was a date in the first decade of the twenty-first century and a figure in Arabic numerals, an-



nouncing that the owner of the head had weighed two hundred and five pounds.

The Lumlus opened its mandibles in a grin as Hardwick entered the room. The Lumlus was about three feet tall and hung suspended from the ceiling, grasping the trap-eeze bar which had been placed there for its children. Hardwick stopped warily in front of the trap-eeze. It always paid to be wary with a Lumlus you did not know. There was no predicting a Lumlus, for the Lumlus kept their mores secret. As a result, their actions and motivations assumed no pattern a human being could understand.

"Come in, Hardwick," the Lumlus said, its artificial voice issuing from the voicebox it wore like an outsized pendant around its thorax. "You have nothing to fear from me. Tell me, what is my occupation?"

Like the Communist humans of the last century, the Lumlus asked dialectic questions. The Lumlus knew its own occupation; Hardwick knew its occupation; it knew Hardwick knew its occupation — but it asked the question anyway.

"You're a hunter," Hardwick said.

"And what do I hunt?"

"You hunt people," Hardwick responded promptly, indifferently.

"You don't care?"

"You don't hunt my kind of people."

"What kind of people do I hunt?"

"You hunt," Hardwick said, as if it were part of a catechism, "the wild people who do not live in the Lumlus cities."

"Last week," the Lumlus went on, "my overseer was killed on a hunting accident. I need a new overseer and have selected you."

"I've spent all my life in the city," Hardwick said. "I've never been beyond the frontier. I've never seen the wild people." He grinned and could tell the Lumlus was pleased by the grin. "Except after they have been mounted."

"I can teach any intelligent Earthman an Overseer's duties," the Lumlus said. "You have been selected because you show no hostility whatever toward the Lumlus."

The muscles around Hardwick's mouth tightened. He was a tall man with brushcut blond hair. He wore a pair of khaki trousers and nothing else and the trousers were worn thin at the knees and along Hardwick's thighs. Everything about him was hard, his eyes most of all. The Lumlus did not know this: a Lumlus could tell nothing from an Earthman's eyes or from his expression. A Lumlus depended for his evaluation upon overt actions. "You are pleased?" the Lumlus

asked.

Hardwick nodded, "Yeah," he said. He had a right to be pleased, he thought. He was only twenty-five, a very young age for a Lumlus Overseer. Sure, he thought, I haven't shown any overt hostility toward the Lumlus. Why the hell should I? They rule the roost, don't they? He grinned and it was not a pleasant grin but it meant nothing to the Lumlus. We have been conquered, he thought. They came from out of space and conquered us. He laughed. Not in spaceships or flying saucers or on ether drive or hyperdrive or space-warp or anything else the fiction writers of the last century dreamed up.

They came on a meteor.

They came as spores, apparently planet spores.

They spent the pre-birth part of their lives as plants and the spores could live in airless space.

By chance, their meteor landed on Earth and although most of the spores had perished in the heat of friction, a few had lodged in a deep crevice in the meteor and had survived the passage of Earth's atmosphere.

The spores ripened and hatched.

The Lumlus multiplied with fantastic speed. Their culture, like that of a terrestrial insect, was not learned but instinctive. Across ten

thousand light years of space, they lost nothing.

They multiplied — and conquered.

"Why do you laugh?" the Lumlus asked Hardwick. "You want the job, don't you?"

"I'll take it," Hardwick said.

"Splendid, splendid. We leave in the morning on a hunting expedition. Prepare your people."

Hardwick nodded and left the Lumlus' room. The last thing he saw was the red-faced human head mounted on the wall. The Lumlus taxidermist had spread the thick lips in a grin. The teeth were very white.

"**S**TRING your bows tonight," Hardwick told his hunters later. "I want no delays in the morning."

"You want," one of the hunters mumbled. "You like hunting people, Hardwick?"

"The wild ones?" Hardwick said.

"They're people." The hunter who spoke was Phillips, a short, broad-shouldered man twice Hardwick's age. He had an ugly, surly face but wide alert eyes. "They like to live, same as you."

"I've never been on a hunt," Hardwick admitted, and was immediately sorry he had done so.

"So they make you Overseer," Phillips grunted, disgusted.

Hardwick merely nodded.

"Ever kill a man?" Phillips snapped at him suddenly.

"I don't see where that has anything to do with it."

"Did you?"

"No."

"I did," Phillips said slowly. "I don't like myself for it. I thought you would like to know."

"I don't see what the hell difference that makes. You're a hunter. You kill the Wild Ones because the Lumlus want you to. Because the Lumlus get a bang out of it. It doesn't matter whether you like to kill them or not."

"You're a pretty poor excuse for a human being," Phillips said.

The argument surprised Hardwick. He had come to the hunters' barracks unprepared for it. He had never held any feelings one way or the other about the Wild Ones. The hunters had gathered about him in a tight circle now, watching him, watching Phillips, waiting. The men had been stringing their longbows at Hardwick's orders. The women, who hunted with lariats and short stabbing swords, were sitting about indolently, waiting for the evening meal. They came and surrounded Hardwick and Phillips now. They said nothing.

"Are you going to take that from me?" Phillips asked Hard-

wick, surprise in his rasping voice.

"I'm interested in seeing the hunt comes off all right. That's all I'm interested in at the moment."

"But you never hunted before in your life. The Lumlus must be crazy."

Hardwick shrugged but was grateful because Phillips' irrational outburst was taking a new direction.

"Tell me, Hardwick, aren't they crazy? Aren't your masters crazy?"

"They're your masters too."

"Yes. But I'm not so happy about it."

Hardwick turned and studied the faces of the male and female hunters who had clustered around them in the barracks. They were angry faces, hostile faces. He faced Phillips and demanded, "Why are you riding me?"

"I'll tell you why," Phillips said slowly. "Because it's people like you who make it easy for the Lumlus to rule us, that's why."

"You're a malcontent. You were born and lived half your life before the Lumlus came. That's your trouble."

"What about these girls? They're younger than you. Ask them."

"I don't want to ask them."

"You're afraid."

"I have a job to do. String your bows. I'll inspect in half an hour."

"He'll inspect in half an hour,"

Phillips echoed his tones.

"Lariats too," Hardwick said. "I don't want to see any knots in them."

"You're a pretty poor excuse for a man," Phillips said.

"Half an hour, don't forget." Hardwick turned his back coolly and began to stride from the circle.

"You're yellow," a girl's voice said.

Hardwick whirled. He did not know which girl had spoken. Phillips was leering at him. Their needling bothered him but he would survive it. If they thought he was yellow, though, that was something else. He could not maintain discipline if they thought he was yellow.

"Do you think I'm yellow too?" he asked Phillips.

"I don't know you well enough. Maybe you're yellow."

"But you know I'm not a hunter."

"That's right. You're no hunter."

"And hunters aren't yellow? Hunters know how to fight and like to fight?"

"Say, what is this? Lumlus questions, if you ask me."

"Answer my question"

"Well, yes. Yes to both."

"Then hit me," Hardwick said.

"That's an order, Phillips."

The older man stood there and looked at him. There was no ex-

pression on Phillips' face. His eyes revealed nothing but all at once his right fist blurred up at Hardwick's jaw. Hardwick grinned. Phillips had telegraphed the blow by lowering his right shoulder a fraction of an inch. Hardwick grunted and caught the right cross on the palm of his left hand. He countered with his own right hand, not closing his fist but swinging his open hand around as hard as he could and striking the side of Phillips' jaw with the heel of his palm. With his fist he could have knocked Phillips out but he did not want to knock him out. He wanted to infuriate the hunter. He wanted him to come up swinging. He wanted to beat him in a fair fight so he swung the flat of his hand and drove Phillips half way across the room with it.

Phillips came back at him roaring but as Hardwick lifted his hands to defend himself something dropped over his shoulder from above and tightened around his biceps and across the muscles of his chest and back. It was a lariat and it pinned his arms to his sides. The girl who had thrown it jerked the end of the rope and Hardwick stumbled toward Phillips, who struck him with both fists, twice with the left and once with the right, in the face. Hardwick went down and went down hard. The girl jerked her

lariat and he rolled over on his back. Something stung the side of his neck. He blinked his eyes open and saw a girl kneeling near him, the point of her short stabbing sword biting into his neck.

"Who's yellow now?" Hardwick asked softly. "Don't you fight your own battles, Phillips?"

The girl released the lariat loop at a signal from Phillips. Hardwick stood up unsteadily. "Well, don't you?"

"Why should I?" Phillips said easily. "I'm a hunter. That's how I've been taught to hunt. From a distance, I use the long bow. It can kill at two hundred yards, but if it misses, the girls run on ahead and use their lariats. If we want to take the Wild Ones alive I come forward and use my fists. Otherwise, the girls have their swords. What's yellow about using what the Lumlus teach us to use?"

Hardwick could not answer the question. He felt foolish. He had been baited and bested. As an Overseer, he had gotten off to a bad start and the start was very important, especially since he knew next to nothing about hunting.

The girl who had snared him with her lariat went over to Phillips and examined the welt on his jaw with the tips of her fingers. She was a tall girl with long dark hair and a sleek, flat-muscled body.

She was probably not much of a huntress because the Lumlus preferred their huntresses heavier and more thickly muscled, but she was a lot of woman in tight khaki trousers and halter.

"Are you all right?" she asked Phillips.

"He didn't hurt me much."

"I would have killed him," she said, and kissed Phillips on the cheek.

For some reason, that hurt Hardwick more than Phillips' blows. He went outside and waited half an hour, then returned to inspect bows and lariats. Everything was in order, and that should have pleased him. Instead, he felt a vague sense of defeat.

THE human members of the hunting party left the east gate of the city shortly before dawn. Hardwick had roused them early and had marched them through the dark streets of the city without any breakfast, having decided they would breakfast on the other side of the gate. There were six archers and an even dozen ropers on the expedition. Hardwick had armed himself only with a short stabbing sword because he would have no trouble with that weapon. Overhead, the Lumlus' helicopter purred smoothly, circling.

Phillips seemed genial enough at

breakfast and even if they did not like the hunt, the spirit of the hunt possessed the others as they ate. Hardwick did not expect too much trouble from them. But he did know they disliked him for some vague, paradoxical reason. They hunted people, if the Wild Ones were people. They killed people. Hardwick had never hunted and never killed but because Hardwick had not voiced his opposition to the hunt, that made him a pariah. It didn't make sense.

The helicopter circled and buzzed, as if in impatience. "All right," Hardwick said, "let's get started."

The archers led the way, marching in a broad front up the flanks of the low hills which surrounded the city. There were six archers and they marched six abreast, their great longbows ready, the metal insignia of their Lumlus master gleaming crimson in the early morning sunlight. Like blood, Hardwick thought. Exactly like blood.

Beyond the range of low hills, which had been traversed by mid-morning, was the flat green glaze of an atomic explosion. The bomb, which had been dropped before Hardwick was born, had missed the city by several miles. The histories which the Lumlus allowed you to read said it was one of the last bombs of the final human war. It had been a devastating war and,

with atomics and hydrogen bombs and bacteriological warfare, had decimated Earth's population. It had made the Lumlus conquest comparatively simple, but the already decimated population had been decimated again. After the war and the Lumlus conquest, the city people became Lumlus slaves and the country people degenerated quickly to savagery — or so the Lumlus histories declared — and became Wild Ones.

The archers stopped their march, the ropers coming up behind them. Here the flat green glaze was replaced by rocky land and scrub vegetation and an occasional outcropping. In the distance was another range of hills.

"What's the trouble?" Hardwick asked.

"No trouble. They live in those hills."

"The Wild Ones?"

"Yes. We generally send a girl up ahead."

"What do you do that for?"

"Too many men among the Wild Ones. They raid the city for women, sometimes. If they're around and we send a girl up ahead, she'll smoke them out."

"Isn't it dangerous?" Hardwick wanted to know.

"Of course it's dangerous. Does it matter to you?"

"Yeah, it matters. Sending a girl

—”

“The Lumlus are asexual,” Phillips said coldly. “They refuse to make any distinction between the sexes in human beings, so why should you?”

“Forget it,” Hardwick said. “Send whoever you want.”

“Nervous, boy?”

“Why the hell should I be nervous?”

“You’re acting nervous. Ever seen a Wild One before?”

“Only those which were captured alive and brought to the city. I saw them coming in once or twice.”

“What do you think happened to them?”

“I don’t know what happened to them.”

“I’ll tell you what happened, but you won’t believe it.”

“Then don’t bother telling me.”

“The Lumlus trained them for a couple of years and they weren’t Wild Ones any longer.”

“That’s impossible,” Hardwick said.

“I told you you wouldn’t believe me.”

“It has to be a lie. The Wild Ones aren’t fully human, as we are.”

“The Lumlus say.”

“Go ahead and send a girl, Phillips.”

“Ann!” Phillips shouted. The girl who had roped Hardwick the

evening before came trotting up to them. “Take a look at Ann,” Phillips said. “You think she’s pretty?”

Hardwick remembered the kiss Ann had given Phillips. “She’s pretty.”

“Her mother was a Wild One.”

“I don’t believe you,” Hardwick said promptly.

“Oh, what do you care what he believes?” the girl asked Phillips. “Does it matter to you? Does it matter to anyone?”

Phillips shrugged and said, “Your turn to be a lure, Ann. Be careful, will you?”

Hardwick grinned and Phillips said coldly, “What’s so funny?”

“I was just thinking, if I cared about her the way you seem to care about her, I’d send someone else.”

“I’d hate him if he did,” Ann said. “I wouldn’t forgive him.”

“That kind of altruism is why we were a pushover for the Lumlus,” Hardwick said. “It’s why they conquered us.”

“Then you do care!” Anne cried.

“I don’t like the idea of being a slave any more than you like the idea of being a slave. I don’t bat my head against a wall thinking about it, that’s all.”

Phillips and Ann embraced swiftly, then the girl sprinted quickly across the scrub country toward the hills without looking back. Phil-

lips raised his hand and the archers advanced slowly, steadily. They would reach the hills at least half an hour after Ann did, Hardwick judged.

"There's one thing I don't get," he told Phillips. "If the Wild Ones are human and can understand, how come they don't get wise to the way you send a girl forward as a lure?"

"Who said they don't?"

"You —"

"Not me. When they raid the city for women or take women who stray outside the city walls, its rarely by force. They try to persuade our women. Hell, our men too for that matter. Even if they don't have civilization, the Wild Ones say, whatever they do have is better than slavery."

"You mean they know Ann's a lure?"

"Sure they know it. They'll try to persuade her anyway."

"They have weapons?"

"You don't know much, do you? Of course they have weapons. They don't like to fight us and we don't like to fight them, but we have to and they know we have to and we know it."

"Why?" Hardwick asked, and immediately realized the question was an unnecessary one.

"The Lumlus," Phillips said, spitting and then staring up balefully at the helicopter which hov-

ered above them. "The Lumlus up there with his nerve ray. If we don't fight, he kills all of us. Doesn't figure, does it? Because if we give him the kind of fight he wants, a lot of yelling and a lot of blood and some prisoners on both sides and some death too, most of us will live through it. The other way, we all die. Come on, Hardwick, if we don't step on it the Wild Ones will have too much time with Ann."

Phillips lifted his arm. The archers and the remaining ropers began to trot. Hardwick trotted with them and began to feel superfluous. Then he told himself: stop knocking yourself out. You learn on this trip. After this trip, you take over.

Above them, the Lumlus helicopter droned after them, not fifty feet in the air.

Pines grew in the hills, and dense copses of red-berried mountain ash. Birds chattered in the trees and the sound was strange to Hardwick, for the Lumlus had driven all animal life except human life — and that, he realized for the first time, only because the humans were their slaves — from the city.

"I don't see her," Phillips said "I don't hear anything."

The archers strung arrows to their bows and waited for orders. The ropers milled about uncertainly, their lariats ready. Phillips was nervous, Hardwick thought, but

tried not to show it.

"What if they don't show up?" Hardwick asked.

"Then the hunt's a flop. The Lumlus won't like you for it. Hardwick."

"I'd be blamed?"

"You're the Overseer, aren't you?"

Instead of answering, Hardwick walked on ahead and called, "Ann! Hey, Ann. Where are you?"

Phillips came up behind him and put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm not sure I like this," the older man said. "It never happened this way before."

"What never happened this way?"

"The hunt. Too quiet, for one thing. I've been around a long time, Hardwick, I just know something's wrong, that's all."

"Ann? She's been taken?"

"Not that. Listen. Do you hear anything?"

At first Hardwick shook his head, then he jerked it upright and listened with every atom of his being. He had heard something all right, and it was a familiar sound. A clicking. A scraping. He didn't like the sound. He had never liked it. It was the sound the Lumlus made when they left their trapezes—which was rare—for the sidewalks and streets of the city. It was the sound of their hard, chite-

nous limbs in contact with cement. Or with stone.

With the rocks of the low, deeply eroded hills.

Lumlus, Hardwick thought, here? It didn't make sense.

"Those damn insects!" Phillips said in a rage. "I never saw them try anything like this, but I've heard of it."

"Like what?" Hardwick said.

"Joining the hunt on foot."

"That's impossible," Hardwick said at once. "All they want to do is watch."

"You're a Lumlus maybe?" Phillips asked. "You know how their minds work?"

"No, but —"

"But hell. They're turning the tables. We're usually the hunters. Today we're going to be the hunted. They're boss. They can do what they want."

The clicking, scraping sounds became louder. There was no doubt about it now at all, Hardwick thought. It was the sound the Lumlus made walking.

"Spread out, men!" Phillips cried. "Keep down. Don't give them a good target. But don't let your arrows fly until we're sure they're planning on a kill."

The archers and ropers dispersed, swift bronzed figures disappearing in the brush and among the mountain ash. "If they've hurt

Ann —" Phillips mumbled.

All at once the first Lumlus appeared. It was about three feet long. It came walking on four legs. Scuttling, Hardwick thought. There was something ugly about the way it moved. Its forelimbs, not in contact with the ground, were free to bear weapons. It carried a short-bow on its left front forelimb, grasped clumsily between large claws. A quiver of arrows was suspended from its thorax. As it scuttled along and slung one of the arrows, it looked like something out of a nightmare. Hardwick was surprised at his own reaction. It was the first time he had ever thought that way about the Lumlus. Previously, they had been the masters. It had hardly mattered what they looked like. They were not monsters: if there were any monsters at all, the Wild Ones and not the Lumlus fit the role.

Now, suddenly, the Lumlus were monsters. It was the way they carried the archaic human weapons, Hardwick decided. There was something ludicrous about it, but something evil too.

Without warning, the first Lumlus let its arrow fly. Hardwick heard the thrum of it almost before he was aware of the motion of the insect's forelimb. Something barely visible flashed by his head and, magically, the shaft of an

arrow appeared in Phillips' shoulder, protruding there and still quivering. Phillips raised his hand quickly and grasped the shaft of the arrow and wrenched at it with all his might.

Hardwick struck his arm down. "Are you crazy?" the younger man said. "You know their arrows are barbed, just like yours. That's no way to get it out. Do you want to bleed to death?"

"Got to find Ann," Phillips said, wincing. "I can't just sit here and —"

"Why don't they fire back?" Hardwick interrupted him. The Lumlus arrows were flying at them in swarms now. Both men had flattened themselves on the ground, Hardwick lithely, ready to spring up, Phillips painfully, lying awkwardly on his side. Every now and then Hardwick would see another man's head bob up uncertainly behind a rock, then disappear again. The men had not yet used their long bows.

"You figure it out," Phillips said, still wincing with pain. "We come out here to hunt our own kind because the Lumlus want us to. Oh, we call them the Wild Ones, but believe me, they're our own kind. We don't like killing them, I already told you that. Then the Lumlus come along with one of their rare hunting parties and for a min-

ute we feel great because it means we won't have to kill the Wild Ones. But only for a minute, Hardwick. It doesn't last. Maybe the Lumlus will grow tired of the sport, you see? Some of our men want to wait and find out."

"I don't get it."

"Because once they return the Lumlus' fire, there won't be any going back to the city. The city will be forever closed to them. Most of these men have families back there, Hardwick. Wives and children for our archers, lovers and husbands for the ropers. They won't fire back unless —"

"Fools!" Hardwick cried. "They'll be slaughtered."

"Aren't you talking out of the other side of your mouth now?"

"Not me. I never liked the Lumlus. I just took them for granted, like bad weather or drowning or disease. "Im beginning to see now — look out!"

Both men flattened themselves as a swarm of arrows flew in their direction. "What about Ann?" Hardwick asked, changing the subject. "They have Ann somewhere, don't they? You won't let them kill your wife, will you?"

"She's not —" Phillips began, but his voice was drowned by the roar of the helicopter motor as the airborne Lumlus dropped groundward to observe the hunt more

closely. Suddenly Hardwick stood up and shook his fist. It was a defiant gesture and a foolish one and it almost cost him his life. He ducked swiftly and an arrow plucked at his ear and he felt the hot stinging blood.

He looked at Phillips. There was no need for words to be spoken but Hardwick said softly, "I'm on your side, Phillips. I'm on your side now."

"And I haven't made up my mind," the older man groaned. "If we fight back, we have to join the Wild Ones — if we survive — because we'll be outlaws in the city."

"Then I'll make up your mind for you," Hardwick said, grasping the hilt of his stabbing sword and preparing to stand.

"It's not that easy," Phillips said holding his arm.

"I thought you said the Wild Ones were human beings, just like us."

"Sure, but we have families back there —"

"Would your families want you to die for them, without lifting a finger in your own defense? Wouldn't your families rather you fought for your lives and maybe raided the city some day to bring them out here with you? Wouldn't they?"

"I don't know," Phillips said bleakly. "I just don't know."

At that moment, a girl screamed. It did not come from the direction of the ropers who had found cover and concealment on the flank of the hill. It came from above, among the pines near the crest.

"Ann!" Phillips cried.

Hardwick sprinted up the hill, only dimly aware of the rain of arrows which swept down upon him. He ran low, his knees bent, his leg muscles aching, but he presented a difficult target that way and it probably saved his life. He shouted something at the top of his lungs and kept on shouting it because it brought response from the archers on the flank of the hill behind him.

Bowstrings thrummed and arrows flew in both directions now.

Grasping the hilt of his short-sword firmly, Hardwick plunged into the grove of pines which topped the hill. It was dim in there, with sunlight slanting through the thick pine boughs only in two places. Somehow, the filtered green light and the two golden shafts of sunlight reminded Hardwick of a cathedral, although he had not seen a cathedral since he was a small boy, when the Lumlus had outlawed religion.

Abruptly he saw Ann ahead of him, struggling with one of the Lumlus. In its forelimb the insect held a nerve ray projector and it was for possession of the deadly

weapon that Ann was struggling.

Hardwick grabbed the creature by the narrow part of its thorax and tugged at it. Whistling, squawking sounds emerged from the voice-box. Hardwick twisted the Lumlus' thorax and there was a loud cracking sound, then the man held a dead insect, chitinous and loathsome, in his hands. He dropped it and it clattered and lay still.

"It got tired of the hunt," Ann said hysterically. "It tired and said the hunt had gone on long enough. It was going to use the nerve ray. It was going to kill all of you. All of you."

"Take it easy," Hardwick said.

"We're firing back now. Aren't we? It doesn't matter how we kill them. If we don't kill, they will. Give me the projector."

Wordless, Hardwick let her have it.

In five minutes, it was over. She fanned out the projector beam and sprayed it across the ground and down the hillside at the Lumlus. They died swiftly and silently and there was utterly no expression on Ann's face as she returned the projector to Hardwick. He looked at her and slapped her face hard and abruptly she began to cry and he knew she would be better soon.

"There now," he said soothingly. "It's all over."

It wasn't all over. It had barely

begun.

Something flashed overhead. There was a droning roar. Hardwick looked up. They had forgotten the helicopter.

"It has a nerve ray!" Ann wailed. "It will use"

Hardwick wasn't listening to the rest of what she said. He moved close to her and grabbed the lariat hanging at her waist. He swung it once and let the loop fly upwards, but it came down in a coil at his feet. He had had the height, but his aim had been poor.

The Lumlus began to raise his helicopter, apparently understanding Hardwick's intentions. Frantically, the earthman spun the loop of the lariat again until it made a gray blurring circle in the air over his head. He left it fly a second time and realized as he let go that he wouldn't have a third chance. If he missed this time, the Lumlus would kill them all as easily as Ann had killed the other insects.

He saw her now, firing her projector. Savagely, hopelessly, she flung it aside. "Empty!" she wailed, and watched with him as the loop of the lariat climbed.

And caught something.

And held.

For an instant the end of the rope trailed along the ground. Hardwick ran after it. By the time he reached it, the rope was already

at the height of his shoulders. He stumbled over a rock and almost fell. When he regained balance again, the rope was overhead, and still rising. Hardwick crouched and sprang into the air, clutching desperately. The fingers of his left hand closed on the rope and he held on, chinning himself up slowly, then grasping the thin, incredibly strong, cutting rope with his left hand, then slowly pulling himself up, hand over hand

When he went one third of the way, dangling a hundred feet off the ground as the helicopter continued gaining altitude, the Lumlus fired its nerve ray projector.

Hardwick could see the insect leaning out of the airship, pointing the weapon down at him. It was eerie because the weapon made no sound, fired nothing you could see and did not buck in the Lumlus' claw. But at any moment the invisible radiation might instantly snuff out Hardwick's life.

Hand over hand he climbed the rope, his fingers numb, his arms straining and painful at the sockets. He swung his body back and forth, creating a pendulum motion. At this height it was dangerous, for the rope swung back and forth through an arc fifty feet across and if Hardwick lost his grip he would die on the rocks below.

Up he went, and up. The under-

belly of the helicopter blotted out the sun now at the middle of his wire pendulum swing. He hardly knew where the strength came for each additional effort as he went up hand over hand. Any moment, he expected his life to end in a searing, nerve-shattering burst of intense pain.

And then, incredibly, he reached the helicopter. The lariat had caught on a flange on the lower part of the doorframe, probably used for flight stairs. Hardwick closed his fingers around the flange and banged with his free hand on the door. He could see the Lumlus at the side window of the airship, its forelimb stretching, reaching with the projector. The curvature of the helicopter's body made it impossible for the Lumlus to hit Hardwick, however, and presently the insect's arm withdrew.

Fool, Hardwick thought. Fool. All you have to do is wait. I can't hang on forever. In another few seconds, I'll fall off. But you won't wait. Because I'm a mere human and you're of the Lumlus and I've challenged you . . .

The door slid into the fuselage of the helicopter and the Lumlus appeared there, its voice-box shouting, "Dog of an overseer, I'll kill you —"

Hardwick grasped the insect's hind limb, wondering how long the helicopter would remain on automatic pilot with the updrafts of air from the hills below unsettling it. Something rattled in the Lumlus' voice-box as Hardwick swung the creature out once, then swung it against the fuselage of the airship. There was a crunching sound and Hardwick let go of the Lumlus and watched it fall.

Then he climbed within the helicopter.

* * *

Later, after Phillips' wound had been dressed and they led their small party in the direction of the Wild Ones' settlement, Hardwick said, "But I thought Ann was your wife."

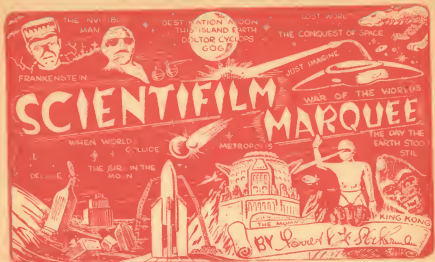
"No," Phillips said. "My daughter."

"You were very brave up there," Ann told Hardwick. "I've changed my mind about you. You looked very good up there."

"Hell," Phillips said. "He looked wonderful. He saved all our lives."

Impulsively, Ann took Hardwick's hand. "Think you'll like it among the Wild Ones?" she asked.

He nodded. "I think I'll love it," he said.



THE BIG NEWS for Christmas is that GEO PAL has picked his next picture! The subject matter has never been depicted on the screen, and the spectacular climax inherent in the locale might challenge DeMille. Authors from Arthur Conan Doyle to Stanton Arthur Coblenz have developed the theme, from "The Maracot Deep" to "The Sunken World." Pal has selected novelist and slick writer David Duncan, who's done "Dark Dominion" and "Beyond Eden" in the sci-fi field, to develop for him: ATLANTIS!

Charles Beaumont, in criticizing the science screen, recently said: "The correction of a single mistake—Hollywood's mad insistence upon hiring writers who know nothing about s.f., and care for it less, to write s.f.—might do wonders tow-

ard bringing about a renaissance." It gives me great pleasure, therefore, to report that the talents of s.f. author Frank Quattrocchi, who does know something about s.f. and does definitely care for the medium, have been employed to produce an original sci-fi screenplay! Quattrocchi, who has authored such memorable yarns as "Assignment in the Unknown," "The Addict," "Sword from the Stars," etc., has been commissioned to write, and had accepted for immediate filming, a 109 page shooting script about a radioactive island of giant mutations. S. F. artist and special effects man Paul Blaisdell has already been called in for a consultation by the production's design department. Color and widescreen treatment are contemplated for the Quattrocchi film.

Of course Alfred Bester himself is cinemadapting his own prize-winning **DEMOLISHED MAN** for Jose Ferrer. More about this big news later in the column.

This may presage a whole new age of scientifilms, with Chad Oliver being employed to turn his own hit *Shadows in the Sun* into a screenplay, Kris Neville being put under contract to develop his *Special Delivery* (from IMAGINATION) for a perceptive producer, even van Vogt being signed to translate **SLAN** to celluloid! In the past few weeks a parade of sci-fi talents has passed thru the office of the Story Editor for Sam Goldwyn jr, including Jerome Bixby, Gordon Dewey, Weaver Wright, Chad Oliver, Paul Blaisdell and Frank Quattrocchi.

Stanley Grauman Weinbaum's great story of the invulnerable woman, "The Adaptive Ultimate," has been purchased by Science Fiction Theater for adaptation to telefilm. *Disney* is doing the monster for MGM's Jupiterian epic, **FORBIDDEN PLANET**: a nightmarish creation 12 feet tall in the form of a four-legged pollywog with a malignant human head! Inside sources tell me that the robot in the film looks very effective, and I hear that there will be a weird new type musical background that will outtheramin the theramin!

Richard Denning, Lori Nelson and Adele Jergens have been cast for Golden State Productions' **THE DAY THE WORLD ENDED!** James H. Nicholson, 25 years ago Vice-President of the Boys Scientifiction Club, is President of the

American Releasing Corp that will release the picture. Lou Rusoff screenscripted. Paul Blaisdell both builds the mutant monster menace for this thriller of *After Atomigeddon* and *is* the monster!

On the Threshold of Space went into production at 20th-Fox Studios in Sept. Quick to capitalize on the 'MOUSE in the Sky' announcement of Pres. Eisenhower, a score of satellite titles have been registered in addition to those that were already on the docket. Artificial moon pictures previously announced for production included Hollywood columnist Dick Williams' *Space Station—USA* and *Space Fortress*, and *The Thirteenth Moon*, *Space Island* and *Prof. Hagge's Private Planet* (an Ida Lupino project). Newly added are: "The Little Moon," "Invisible Sun," "The Sky Legion," "Artificial Space Stations," "IGY," "Ionosphere," "Satellite Operation," "Space Satellites," "Satellite Rockets," "Around the Earth in 90 Minutes," "Circle the Earth in 90 Minutes," "Circle the Earth with Satellites," "Earth Around with Satellites," "Leaving the Earth," "Seven Miles a Second," "5000 Miles an Hour," "Man Made Moon" and "Worlds to Come." Producer-Director Vincent Sherman is interested in the potentials of Doubleday Science Fiction selection "Satellite E One." Visual Transcriptions, primarily a telefilm company, is planning to edit together several half hour space telepix to be released as *Satellite*. I wonder whatever became of stalactites and stalagmites?

FROM out of the sky and down to Earth, there'll be a new "slant" on Tarzan when an almond-eyed Oriental essays the role for a Japanese version to be known as *The Brooba*.

Double bill "It Came from Beneath the Sea" and "Creature with the Atom Brain" did such sensational business thruout the country (a weekend opening in Boston, for instance, that corralled four and a half times as much business as any previous weekend opening) that Clover Productions will seek to repeat with *Attack of the Flying Saucers* and *Cyclops*, the *One-Eyed Monster*, both originals by Curt (Donovan's Brain) Siodmak. Ray Harryhausen, fan risen from the ranks who animated the giant octopus risen from the waves in "It Came from Beneath the Sea," is busy building a variety of models of flying saucers as I write, according to a just completed telephone chat with him about the production.

So: there's the Cyclopean, Siodmakian monster which will have but a single orb (the original private eye?) Then there's *The Beast with 1,000,000 Eyes*. Paul Blaisdell gets to relax with his latest creation, which will only have three eyes (in addition to two tendrils).

The Milner Bros. are producing *The Phantom from 10,000 Leagues* . . . A space-tease act is being scripted for sophisticated ecdysiast Lili St. Cyr, the stripteuse with the educated epidermis . . . Edward G. Robinson jr has purchased "Space Ship," a screenplay for independent filming by Rexford Productions

. . . Consolidated-Tele Pictures started shooting in Sept. on a filmed teleseries titled "Space Riders" . . . *The Gamma People* (they seem to be something like The Body Snatchers from advance reports) co-stars Paul Douglas with Eva (Spaceways) Bartok. Produced in Austria . . . Allied Artists has produced *World Without End*, in color &-scope, on a hush-hush basis.

Proving you can't keep a bad Creature down, the amphibeast from the Black Lagoon will demonstrate he's as durable as the Frankenstein monster in his third cinemadventure, to be known as *The Creature Walks Among Us*. Jeff Morrow and Rex Reason, who played together in THIS ISLAND EARTH, will be back together in this one.

The great-great grandniece of Jules Verne, now living in Virginia, has given her blessing for production of the sequel to Disney's box-office smash, "20,000 Leagues under the Sea." Bryan Foy, who many years ago did a followup to another scientific film ("The Return of Dr. X"), will produce this one, THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND.

Jack Hawkins, the Pharaoh of "Land of the Pharaohs," will star in THIS ISLAND, a space station melodrama.

The Volunteer will depict the experiences of the first woman to go to Mars.

"No Food for Thought," successfully presented on Science Fiction Theater by Ivan Tors, has served as the basis for an expanded film version. Teleplay concerned the de-

velopment of a nutrient to replace food, with scientist creating super size and strength in the process. In the picture the experiment will be carried forward to the creation of a giant human being.

Eleventh hour flashes: *Toward the Unknown*, about experimental planes of the future, will be a top-budget production from Warner Bros. . . . Mike Connolly reports Ken Darling has done "a weird science-fiction script, *Envoy Earth*" . . . Eddie Kafafian tells me Wyott Ordnung is seeking important dough for financing of his space-time script . . . Milt Luban & Ken Crossen have a hot treatment in *Barrier to the Stars* . . . Yvonne De Carlo has script, will travel, to star herself in *Green Planet Sram* . . . Watch for "1976" on television (a prediction of America 200 years after the signing of the Constitution), and "1980" from Universal-International . . . A Central American producer knocked on Ray Bradbury's door and told him he wanted to film his *Esquire* short, "The Dragon." A campus film club at the University of California, Westwood, Calif., will film Bradbury's "Outcasts of the Stars." And John Eppolito and associates are in the art-and-architecture planning stage of capturing Bradbury's *Soft Rains* on celluloid.

William James and Edward LeVeque have a hot package in Science Fiction Filmmakers.

S MASHING good news! I can now be the first to reveal to you, the sci-fi segment of hu-

manity, the carefully guarded secret that has been kept for a year, the pregnant possibility that was actually confided to me on the 29th of September, *last year*. At that time it was a hope, a dream, a prayed-for possibility that one of the then Big 3 (the 4th, Sturgeon's *More Than Human*, has since been added) would actually be optioned for filming. No less an exciting screen personality than Jose Ferrer had "discovered" one of the International Fantasy Award novels—*Earth Abides*, THE DEMOLISHED MAN and Simak's *City*—and was himself excited by its screen prospects. But could it be done, could those law-enforcing mutant men, those mind-reading Espers be successfully translated to celluloid?

Sub rosa, unbeknownst to most fans, the telepathic problem was tackled and, apparently, by creative imagination, won—for the word is out: Jose Ferrer has purchased that tour de force of the 24th Century, THE DEMOLISHED MAN! Better news than even that, perhaps, is that Alf Bester, author of the book, will himself adapt his modern classic for the motion picture!

I call it "Project: Alchemy" — how to turn celluloid into gold. Hollywood has found the formula: *science fiction!* To create the long green line at the box-office, the futuramas of outer spaces, unknown places and alien races are proving money magnets. Result: the money magnates at MGM are opening the bank vaults for *their* big scientifilm spectacle, FORBIDDEN PLANET.

Rarely has so much pre-production publicity been put out about a Vastern (*Forbidden Planet* takes place Way Out Vast in deep space). Hardly a day goes by but what Hedda Hopper or Milt Luban or Mike Connolly or Dick Williams or George Phair isn't telling us that: Anne Francis' wardrobe in the picture will be 2-D (diaphanous but decent) . . . dateline of the production will be AD 2200 . . . it will take place 500 years in the future (who do you read?) . . . the mechanical man will be played by Robot Taylor . . . there'll be a dero in it (Frankie Darro) . . . heroine's name is Purity, and she's never had an evil thot in her life (is this science fiction or a fantasy?) . . . sky on Jupiter (or is it Mercury?) will be chartreuse, with purple trees. Sounds like a real crazy mixed up planet! Visitors are verboten on the set, but my xenomorphic spy from outer space, which disguises itself as a coke bottle, reports to me they've painted the biggest cyclo-rama yet: completely encircling the interior of one of MGM's largest sound stages, a huge color mural covers more than 10,000 sq. ft. It will, quote, "be used as the background for a sequence showing a flying saucer landing on the volcanic wasteland of another world."

\$2,000,000 Fund for '9 Billion' Pic—that's the headline in *Variety*. Explanation: First picture for theatrical release to be produced by newly formed Dudley Pictures under its program of 26 features over a 5-year period will be *The Nine Billion Names of God*, based on the

unusual short s.f. story of the same name by famed Arthur C. Clarke, recently republished in the *New York Post* for the benefit of its million weekend readers. Art, currently deep-sea diving in Australian waters, surfaces long enough to confirm the news of the sale.

Two Million and a Half—that's the figure Rickert van Halspiegel quotes me as the sum it will in all probability require to translate the huge (230 page) shooting script of BEYOND THE BARRIERS OF SPACE to the silver screen. Poul Anderson collabed on the scenario stint. Forrest J. Ackerman has been mentioned as Technical Advisor.

And finally, TEN MILLION DOLLARS . . . has not been budgeted by anybody this season for a scientifiilm—but sci-fi artist Paul Blaisdell has handled special effects for a modest little shocker called *The Beast with 1,000,000 Eyes*. A Pacemaker Production under the aegis of Roger Corman. I've read the script, and it's honestly not half bad. Brain-stealers from Mars is the theme. "My, what a big brain Grand-Mars' got!" ("The better to feast upon," thinks the Beast.) There is no truth to the rumor that I have written a sequence into the picture justifying the existence of canals on Mars on the grounds that the hungry cerebrum - subsisting Inhabitants require them for brain-washing. Nor that Blaisdell's next assignment will be the creation of a Hollywolf, described as a "Beast with 1,000,000 Hands!"

Edgar Allen Poe (who was not consulted) is having his "Gold Bug"

turned into a co-starring vehicle for Lon Chaney jr and Victor Jory. Produced in Eastman Color by W. Lee Wilder, it will be titled *The Menfish*. FLASH! Stop Press! Important! The title of "The Menfish" has just been changed to "The Manfish." (Or, how singularly unimportant.)

Allied Artists will go all out on "Fall-Out," graphically depicting the consequences of atomic aftermath, when a strategic American city is showered with radioactive shrapnel, rain, smog and phlug . . . The atomic tragedy, *The Accident*, is to be filmed . . . And shooting in Manila has been completed on *No Place to Hide*.

Faith Domergue, femme lead in THIS ISLAND EARTH, repeats as heroine in Charles Eric Maine's made-in-England *Timeslip*. Latter may be title-changed to THE ISO-TOPE MAN . . . Not to be confused with Jones' *Island Earth*, THIS ISLAND will be a *British* space station spectacle starring John Hawks, last seen as Pharaoh in the Egyptian spectacle, "Land of the Pharaohs."

Bride of the Atom brings 71-year-old film villain Bela Lugosi back to the screen as a mad scientist, mad at mankind in general and former confreres behind the Iron Curtain for kicking him out into the swamps of Florida for (I know you won't believe this) "tampering in God's domain." Apparently the same God who is the only One who can make a tree will bring forth super men and women of His Own accord if and when it suits His master plan.

Impatient Lugosi wants to speed the process up atomically, but naturally comes to a bad end after about 8 bad reels. Lugosi larks thru the role and is about the only thing worth watching in this archaic filmplay, which will no doubt have a long play at Hallowe'en "Spook" Shows and Friday the 13th midnite revels. You can see the same sort of thing, no better nor worse, any nite on TV, done 20 years ago. Rating: one atom.

Daughter of the Atom is not a sequel to the foregoing film but an original screenplay by sci-fi author Frank Quattrocchi, remembered for his "Assignment in the Unknown," "Sea Legs," "The Sword" and others.

It was my pleasure to commend producer Walter Wanger on the splendid job done on THE BODY SNATCHERS after I saw the preview last June. First serialized in *Collier's*, the novel by Jack Finney was soon after pocketbooked by Dell. In reviewing the book I characterized it as a kind of mixture of "The Puppet Masters," "Who Goes There?" and "Shadows in the Sun." I thot it was a *good* book, and as good books can so often be ruined in the filmization (most notorious example: *Four-Sided Triangle*) I approached this preview with trepidation. Imagine my delight to find the book faithfully coming to life almost as written, as page by page I turned it in memory's mind's eye. Very believably done, with the only deviation I recall from the book being the very end, which, a plus for My Home Town, *strengthens* the

story for a change. **THE BODY SNATCHERS** is suspense-horror-human-alien interest material of the first calibre, with a nightmare ending that may send you home to destroy your garden (an allusion that may be understood only after you have seen the picture—which I urge you to do).

The beast that fits the widescreen best, *King Dinosaur*, is set to go on a spree in the film of the same name, and *The Beast of Hollow Mountain*, and two to be produced, Dr. Roy Chapman Andrews' *All About Dinosaurs* and Irwin Allen's *The Animal World*, which turns back the clock 2,000,000,000 years.

From the Antediluvian to the Atomic Age, Nautilus Productions will film a story you're probably familiar with. You should have run across it somewhere along the line, considering it ran thru 13 printings in its original hard cover edition, was a Fiction Book Club selection (10 printings), was published in Omnibook and the old *Liberty* magazine and an Armed Services edition—and is now in its 18th printing as a Pocket Book. It's about a hero named Homer who becomes the second Father of his Country when the atomic blast renders every other man in the world impotent. MR. ADAM! I wonder how many of my readers remember 20 years or more ago when a musi-comedy was filmed around more or less the same theme: *It's Great to be Alive*, in which a mysterious disease named *masculitis* wiped out every man in the world except lucky Raul Roulien.

And that ancient talkie was in turn based on a silent film, *The Last Man on Earth*, originally published in the mid-20's in *Munsey Magazine*!

"THEM!" did so well, earning itself an award as best sound-edited picture of 1954, that Universal is trying an exclamatory sci-fi film, *Tarantula!* An elaboration of a successful telefilm by Robert Fresco—*No Food for Thot* on S.F. Theater—*Tarantula!* will feature a 40 foot man for shock value. Speaking of which, *The Quatermass Experiment*, well-received English telecast turned into a motion picture, will be released in the USA as SHOCK!!—both exclamations being integral parts of the title. Brian Donlevy stars in the role of a space pilot who returns to Earth with his body chemistry lethally altered, so that he sponges up heat from everything around him.

The hit short by Tom Godwin, "The Cold Equations," chosen for anthologization in the new *Dikty-Fell* annual BEST OF S.F., has been turned into a telefilm script by the author and Walt Lee. Producer Lou Place has asked to see the scenario for fulllength film possibilities. Place Productions is also giving a careful reading to "Time Wants A Skeleton," the adaptation by myself and Wendayne Ackerman and Ross Rocklynn of Ross' great time-chase suspense novelet, singled out for praise by Tony Boucher . . . Teleplayscripts have been made of Kris Neville's brilliant "Bettyann" and "Wind in Her Hair" (*Imagination*, Oct. 1950) : : : Dwight V. Swain has done an original tele-

film treatment called "Privacy, Unlimited," an invisibility yarn.

A great cast has been assembled for what is expected to be a great scientific film: 1984. From *Things to Come*, Ralph Richardson; from *Dead of Nite*, Michael Redgrave; herself said to be a sci-fi fanne, Jan Sterling; and Oscar winner Edmond O'Brien. This could be an all-time Great. O departed spirits of Wells, Weinbaum, Orwell, England and all

you other s.f. authors beyond the walls of sleep, be with us yet to see that 1984 is the production it deserves to be!

—Forrest J. Ackerman

SCIENTIFILM MARQUEE is now a regular feature. Columnist Ackerman may be contacted via the Beverly Hills, Calif., telephone exchange by those having news items to contribute.

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF IMAGINATIVE TALES, published bi-monthly at Evanston, Illinois for January, 1956.

1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are:

Publisher, GREENLEAF PUBLISHING COMPANY, 1426 Fowler Ave., Evanston, Illinois.

Editor, William L. Hamling, 1426 Fowler Ave., Evanston, Illinois.

Managing Editor, Frances Hamling, 1426 Fowler Ave., Evanston, Illinois.

Business Manager, None.

2. The owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a partnership or other unincorporated firm, its name and address, as well as that of each individual member, must be given.)

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William L. Hamling, 1426 Fowler Ave., Evanston, Illinois.

Frances Hamling, 1426 Fowler Ave., Evanston, Illinois.

3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None.

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5. The average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails, or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the 12 months preceding the date shown above was: (This information is required from daily, weekly, semiweekly, and triweekly newspapers only).

WILLIAM L. HAMLING, Editor

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 20th day of September, 1955.

(SEAL)

S. J. PELZ.

(My commission expires Feb. 25, 1956)

Letters

from the Readers

BEST FOR HIS MONEY

Dear Bill Hamling:

I enjoyed reading your November issue of IMAGINATIVE TALES very much and thought I'd drop you a line and say so.

I am an avid science fiction reader, reading every book I can get my hands on—and I think this issue of TALES was really tops. I think, in particular, Ray Palmer deserves a big pat on the back for it with his THE METAL EMPEROR. Many stories have been written on robot rulership, but this one was one of the most original and different ones that I have come across. I'd say that Palmer really held the issue together!

I also enjoyed PSI-MAN HEAL MY CHILD, but THE CRITIC didn't hold my interest like good science fiction usually does.

All in all, you provide us with the best copy on the market for my money!

Jerry Rencher
131 Richards St.

Corpus Christi, Texas

We're more than happy to pass

along the pat on the back for Ray. A grander guy in sf—or anyplace for that matter—would be hard to come by. And to top it off he writes a fine story. Who could ask for more? So ok, Ray, after all this praise you'll have to do another lead novel for TALES! . . . Your comment on THE CRITIC is interesting, Jerry. Frankly, we thought it was an excellent yarn and it held our interest all the way. Many thanks for the kind words. We'll try and live up to them with

BEST ON THE NEWSSTANDS

Dear Bill Hamling:

I have just finished reading the lead novel in the November issue of TALES, Ray Palmer's THE METAL EMPEROR. I think it is one of the most action-packed stories I have ever read!

I enjoy IMAGINATIVE TALES better than any other magazine of its type; it contains good, wholesome and clean reading. Please keep up the good work keeping TALES the best science fiction

magazine on the newsstands.

... Oh yes, I also enjoyed the Dwight Swain novel in the September issue, **TERROR STATION**.

Jack Savers

1280 Winston Ave.

San Marino 9, Cal.

You'll be reading plenty of action-packed stories in future issues of **TALES**, Jack. Matter of fact, action-packed stories are our motto! Speaking of Dwight Swain, you'll find a new novel of his coming up shortly in either **TALES** or our companion science fiction magazine, **IMAGINATION**. As you know, Dwight really writes an action story that's hard to beat . . . with

CLIMBING LIKE A JET

Dear Mr. Hamling:

The November issue of IMAGINATIVE TALES was great. Now you're really on the beam by giving us readers real action stories!

THE METAL EMPEROR was excellent—action galore!

The other stories in the issue were also exceptionally good reading. As usual, your departments were interesting.

The cover was well done by your new artist, Lloyd Rognan. Keep him, hope to see more of his work in future issues.

The addition of color inside the book is quite striking. A fine addition.

All in all, TALES is climbing up like a jet fighter!

W. C. Brandt

Apt. N

1725 Seminary Ave.

Oakland, Cal.

More covers coming up by Lloyd Rognan. Glad you like his work. How do you like the new McCauley cover on this issue?

ENJOYABLE BUT IMPROBABLE



"Why didn't you tell me she was a telepath!"

Dear Bill:

I enjoyed reading Ray Palmer's novel, **THE METAL EMPEROR** very much, although it was just about the most improbable story I've ever read. The giant robot I just couldn't swallow!

Your new cover artist is ok!

The inside illos, though, are not met with favor—the red illos are especially distracting.

Good to see a letter column in **TALES**. Only one complaint—make it L-O-N-G-E-R!

Richard Santelli
3525 S. 53rd Ave.
Cicero 50, Ill.

Well, Dick, it would really have surprised us if you could have swallowed that robot—now THAT would be an improbable story! But back to Rap's yarn—what was improbable about it? It's possible a race of metal giants could (maybe does?) exist on the ocean floor. Anyway, Ray presented a nice idea, we thought . . . A word about the color in the September and November issues — the color crept up on us too fast to have our engravings changed for the inside story illustrations. You'll note, effective with this issue that the story illustrations utilizing color have two color plates rather than one solid tone. We think you'll find the color quite an attractive thing from now on. Anyway, let us know your reaction . . . with

SAD DEMISE OF HUMOR

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I am exceedingly disappointed in the revised edition of **IMAGINATIVE TALES**. Hitherto it has been a magazine quite distinct and

set apart as one with humor, that element so often lacking in the science fiction field.

Each month I have looked forward with much pleasure to purchasing my copy of **TALES** and exploring the contents. I have always been more than satisfied. Now, however, it has become one science fiction magazine among many — there are so many adventure magazines on the newsstands that I greatly regret seeing the best among humor turn into another of the same, adventure. I would cast my vote in favor of a return to the more humorous side, instead of the ever so serious!

Carol Monich
4812 11th St., N.
Arlington 5, Va.

The sad fact of the matter is, Carol, that humor doesn't sell magazines. That's the reason we dropped that type of story—most readers prefer adventure! And of course, our job is to please the most readers—if we want to stay in business, and we do! So unfortunately—or fortunately, as the case may be, humor is through as far as we're concerned, and the adventure science fiction story with action is what we'll give our readers. As to there being many of this type on the stands—we disagree. There are only four books in the field in this class—and we publish two of them! . . . with

CONCENTRATE ON WRITING?

Dear Mr. Hamling:

The new issues of **IMAGINATIVE TALES** are a vast improvement. Readers would tire of a

steady diet of humor — even of Thorne Smith—and the stories in previous “humor” issues were far below Thorne Smith’s standards. In fact, most of them were not even funny.

I think that you should strive for a variety of stories instead of specializing. The most important thing, of course, is whether or not the stories are well written.

Keep up the good work with the revived TALES!

Ken Fickle

Box 73

Rossville, Ind.

Not only would readers tire of humor—they did! As to a variety of stories, you’ll find them in com-

ing issues—with plenty of action-adventure to back them up. Good writing? Not necessarily so. The story comes first, writing second. —Ok, we’ll get a lot of kicks from writers on that statement but we believe it firmly. Good writing does not mean a good story—but a good story can hold up under bad writing! Anyway, we’ll present the best in TALES—nothing bad in the lot! . . . Incidentally, if you’ll turn the page you’ll find a subscription blank with a free book bonus offer. Why not do us a favor and subscribe. Ok? See you next issue . . . Featured will be a great new space novel by Dwight V. Swain . . . with



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INTRODUCING the AUTHOR

★ *Richard O. Lewis* ★

(Concluded From Page 2)

The accompanying picture was taken five summers ago at Helena Ark., when I was voyaging down the Mississippi in a 30-foot cabin boat. The following night, tragedy struck. A companion, whom I had known for but a few days, was drowned when wind and waves cap-sized the canoe we were in while we were trying to overtake the cabin which had been driven from its anchorage by the storm. Guided by flashes of lightning, I succeeded in swimming to a muddy shore where I enlisted the aid of a tow-boat. There followed a wild night of searching during which we rescued the cabin boat and the canoe, but not my companion.

That morning, wet, muddy, and nearly exhausted, I lost the beard at a barber shop before reporting to the sheriff's office. The cap in the picture was lost somewhere in the river.

That voyage ended at New Or-

leans seven months after its beginning. Except for the extremely sad experience at Helena, the entire journey was most enjoyable. I sold the cabin boat at New Orleans, brought the canoe back with me, and began immediately to make plans for the extended canoe voyage my wife and I hope to take.

Needless to say, canoeing is a hobby with me. I have canoed in parts of Canada, the Great Lakes, the Gulf, and most of the waterways in between. Canoeing and writing — some day I hope to establish the perfect union between the two. Until then, I shall continue to take short canoe journeys and to turn out short science-fiction stories.

And now I see that the canoe is still waiting in my back yard and the Mississippi is just a scant 50 paces . . .

Richard O. Lewis



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